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"DOG OF A SLAVE! DO YOU BANDY WORDS WITH ME? ONCE MORE—TO WORK, OR—"
AND THE KNOTTED RAWHIDE WAS HELD THREATENINGLY.

Black Panther, THE HALF-BLOOD;

OR,

The Slaves of the Silver Mines.

A TALE OF OLD ARIZONA.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

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POSA MARSH," "ROUND THE CAMP-FIRE,"
"THE COLORADO BOYS," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LAST FEATHER.

"You refuse?"

"I am not a dog, to obey a kick. I will not work at your bidding."

A peculiar scene. The speakers stood face to face beneath a rude, shed-like structure. A huge windlass was near, to which were harnessed several sturdy horses, now at rest.

Around upon every side lay huge piles of mingled earth and quartz, while here and there were scattered sundry rude implements, broken and useless.

Besides these two speakers, others of the human race were near, though seemingly shrinking from observation, their faces showing fear and anxiety. The lithe, almost nude bodies, the peculiar hue of glistening bronze, proclaimed them savages. They were Indians, but they were also *slaves*.

"And what more are you than a dog—though your skin be a shade lighter than those of your brethren? A dog you are, and as a dog you will be treated, unless you obey orders. Again—go to your labor!" harshly added the first speaker; and his sinewy hand grasped the short-handled whip more firmly, while his black eyes glittered ominously.

"Think well, Don Manuel," and the speaker's voice sounded clear and distinct. "You have called me a dog—I, the chief of the Tejuas. I look at my poor children and bear the insult, because I know the heaviest punishment would fall upon them. But I am a man. You laugh—yet I have a heart to feel and suffer, even as though my blood was all white. We are disgraced now—do not try to thrust me down still further. The lash has never yet scored my back. It never shall."

"Obey orders, then. Go do as I bid you, or by our Lady! I'll prove your words a lie by turning slave-whipper myself!"

"'Twill be a black day to you, then," quietly uttered the threatened, his broad chest swelling.

"What! you dare to threaten? you rebel?"

"No, I do not rebel. I simply protest against unjust oppression. You have no right to order me to do a digger's work, while I wear this," and he tapped the leather badge that rested upon his breast, indicating his rank as one of the *mandones*, or overseer.

"Dog of a slave! do you bandy words with

me? Once more—to work, or—" and the knotted rawhide was held threateningly.

"Beware! Strike me not— Ha!"

The long lash whistled through the air as Don Manuel grated forth a fierce oath, but the blow did not take effect as intended. The agile chief sprung aside, and then as the Spaniard was carried forward a pace by the force of his blow, a lightning-like stroke hurled him heavily to the ground, where he lay gasping and quivering, the black blood gushing from his mouth and nostrils.

A peculiar cry uprose, and half a score of the slaves pressed toward the spot, their eyes glittering fiercely, their faces lighted up with an unusual ardor, as they grasped such weapons as lay at hand; stones, clubs or mining tools. For a moment the chief hesitated, and the long-silent war-cry seemed quivering upon his lips; but then the momentary glow died out from his eyes, and a wave of his hand checked the sudden demonstration.

"Patience, children," he uttered, in their native tongue. "'Tis not yet time. Bear your burden a little longer; the hour for striking the oppressor will soon come."

The slaves dropped their rude weapons and fell back without a murmur. This man evidently held wondrous influence over them.

At this moment Don Manuel arose, his eyes ablaze with hatred, a triumphant sneer upon his livid features. Placing a small silver call to his lips, he blew a long, shrill blast, and then without a glance toward the chief, brushed the dust and grime from his gay habiliments.

The answer speedily came in a clash of arms, and then a file of soldiers appeared upon the scene. As their commander saluted, Don Manuel uttered in a clear, even tone:

"Corporal Baja, you are loaded with ball?"

"Yes, Don Manuel."

"Good! You see this slave?"

"You mean Don Pablo?" in surprise.

"None but fools give a title to a slave; but I mean the one sometimes called Pablo. See that you keep him here safe until my return. If he offers to move one step, shoot him down!"

"Yes, Don Manuel, but—" hesitated the soldier, evidently not a little astonished at the order.

"Corporal Baja, attention! What is the first duty of a soldier?"

"To obey orders, senor."

"Good! Obey mine, then," curtly added the Spaniard, as he turned upon his heel and strode hastily from the spot.

"True—a soldier must obey his superiors; but the senor, Don Blood—fire, didn't say I mustn't talk with the prisoner," muttered the corporal, when Don Manuel had disappeared. "Pablo, what does this mean?" he added, turning toward the chief, who stood motionless, with folded arms and lips firmly compressed.

"Mean? It means that the Spaniards are blind, unreasoning fools!" angrily uttered the chief, his eyes flashing and his chest heaving. "They are not contented with having the Tejuas slaves in body, but they must be slaves in mind as well. Day by day they add to the burdens that are already too heavy for human flesh and blood to bear up under. A little more, and—"

"A little more, and—*what?*" added Baja, as the chief paused abruptly.

"Either the slave will lie down and die, or else rise up and become what his fathers were before him—a man!" cried Pablo, impressively.

"There—don't say any more, comrade. Those are heavy words for one in your fix to utter. Luckily, nobody but friends heard you. Comrades," turning to the file of soldiers, "you did not hear what Don Pablo said?"

"No, corporal," promptly replied one grizzled veteran.

"Good! If you *had*, the moment I was off duty I would have felt compelled to thrash each and every one of you. Does Antone Baja ever lie? No. Then take heed. Who ever heard the chief, had better visit the good padre forthwith, and confess his sins, unless he has an especial liking for purgatory. Don Pablo?"

The chief bent his head, and then rising erect, touched his lips with one finger-tip. As by magic the soldiers resumed their former position, their faces as stoical and expressionless as when Don Manuel left them.

Three figures came in view. A peculiar glance filled the eyes of the chief, as he recognized the comers. Besides Don Manuel there were two officers of justice, one of whom corresponded with the constable of our time; the other with the executioner of the middle ages.

"There is the rebel," harshly cried the Spaniard. "Secure the mutinous dog at once."

"Back!" and the voice of the chieftain rung out clear and commanding. "Touch me not with those hands, dog! I will make no resistance, Don Manuel, but let not that foul beast disgrace me with the touch of his bloody hands."

"Down with him—bind his hands, slave, or I'll have you broken upon your own wheel!" vociferated Don Manuel, threatening the Herculean executioner.

An angry cry grated from the chief's lips as the slave seized his shoulders, and then like the lightning bolt his clinched fists shot out and alighted fairly upon the face of the Hercules. A bloody spray followed the blows, but the bronze giant did not flinch, though an ox might have staggered beneath the shock.

His huge paws closed upon the chief, and seemingly without an effort lifted him clear of the ground, holding him helpless as a child. Then his stolid eyes turned toward the Spaniard, in mute inquiry, while the blood slowly trickled from his face, down upon the massive, heaving chest.

"No, Garcia," slowly uttered Don Manuel, "that would be too speedy. The dog must suffer the penalty not only of disobedience, but for inciting an insurrection. Bind his hands and then follow me."

The giant lowered his captive to the ground, and then, despite the struggles of the chief, speedily bound him as directed. Then Don Manuel resumed:

"Corporal Baja, you will remain here and see that these dusky dogs continue their labor. If one rebels, shoot him down."

Antone saluted, and then the Don strode

away, followed by the captive chief, who no longer struggled against his fate. The slaves, awed by the glittering firearms, obeyed orders, and once more work was resumed, by which the precious silver ore was torn from the bosom of its mother earth.

A brief retrospection may not be amiss at this point, for a more perfect understanding of what is to follow.

Some two centuries ago a Jesuit missionary from Sonora, in Mexico, crossed what is now the northern boundary of Mexico, and penetrated the wilds of that then unknown wilderness lying upon and between the Colorado, Gila and Mohave rivers, establishing schools and churches for the religious instruction of the Indians.

Returning, he spread such reports of the country's marvelous richness in mineral treasures as produced a rapid emigration thither, and scores of gold and silver mines were soon in successful operation. By a grand *coup* of the Spaniards and Mexicans, the betrayed savages were reduced to slavery, and most barbarously treated, their chiefs and leading members being held as hostages until all danger of a revolt seemed past; then but too many were cruelly put to death, that their tales of torture might not arouse the slaves to desperation.

Years rolled on. The mine-owners waxed rich and more haughty. The slaves toiled wearily on, but in their hearts there was growing a blaze that would some time burst forth and scatter destruction upon every side.

The settlement with which we have more principally to deal, was situated not far from the banks of the Colorado River. A vast silver mine was owned and worked by a company of Spaniards, some ten or twelve in number, who maintained a strong force of soldiery to keep the slaves in order.

A stout fort, well garrisoned and armed; a huge stone Mission-house; several commodious mansions, besides the long row of dingy quarters, built of *adobes*, where the slaves were confined at night, or at least such of them as were not kept on duty, for the mine was worked by relays, night and day.

Other important points will be made clear as our story progresses.

A peculiar thrill agitated the frame of the prisoner as he noted the place to which he was being taken. More than once had he been called upon to witness proceedings there that never ended save in some act of fiendish diabolism.

It was a long, low apartment in the Mission-house, called by the Spaniards "The chamber of Justice,"—by the slaves, "Devil-room."

The chamber was long and low, and but dimly lighted. A file of soldiers stood near the door. Grouped at the opposite end of the apartment were some half a score men, from their haughty air, their rich garb and jeweled weapons, the mine-owners.

At a gesture from one of these dignitaries, Don Manuel advanced and gave utterance:

"I charge this slave, known as Pablo, the half-blood, with gross disobedience of orders, and with inciting his fellow-slaves to mutiny."

"Let us hear the details, Don Manuel," gravely uttered one of the judges, and his voice

seemed to tremble as he spoke. "He has ever proved a good and trusty servant and this charge is the first spoken against him."

"First, he allowed two slaves to cease work without any excuse."

"Not so," interrupted Pablo, "they were ill—very ill. I thought one would die before he could gain the outer air."

"They were able to walk—then they were fit for work. What matter if they were to die?" brutally added Don Manuel.

"Let that matter rest for the present. You charge him with inciting the slaves to an insurrection?"

"Yes. I ordered him to assist the force in the new vein and he refused. I insisted and he struck me. See! the mark is plain upon my face. The slave struck his master—only that the grumbling dogs needed an example set them, I would have wiped out the insult then and there, though I broke my fouled blade the moment after. Then I heard him cry out to the slaves standing by—'*Patience—'tis not yet time. Bear your burden a little longer; the time to strike will soon come!*'"

There was a general movement among the judges at these clearly enunciated words. Don Manuel's eyes glittered anew as he continued:

"I marked his words well, for they were not the first ones of like import that I had heard from his lips of late. When you remember the slaves look up to him as their leader—their hereditary chief, you will see why I called you here. It is time to act. Shall we wait until they strike the first blow—one that may end in our complete ruin? As one of your number, in self-defense, I say *no*. Make an example of their leader. That will cow them, and all will be well, for without a head and chief, they can do nothing. Brothers, I have spoken."

For a moment all was silent. The judges interchanged glances; the prisoner stood calm and composed, a sneering smile wreathing his thin lips.

"Don Manuel, give the prisoner in charge of Garcia, and then we will decide."

The decision was at length given, though not without much arguing and discussion. While all were in favor of punishment, some were far more lenient, especially Don Cavella, the one alluded to as appearing ill at ease when the charge was given in. But for his opposition, the death-penalty would have been pronounced; and perhaps Pablo would have preferred even that to the punishment finally awarded him.

He was to be bound to the whipping-post, and there, in the presence of all, both freemen and slaves, receive three score lashes. Then he was to be confined in an underground cell until such a time as his judges thought prudent to free him from his bonds.

Due precautions were taken to guard against any outbreak upon the part of the slaves, when they should see their highly revered chieftain so deeply degraded. The entire force of soldiery was marshaled with loaded firearms, and the cannon of the fort were trained so as to sweep the square in which the punishment was to be carried out.

A low groan of agonized despair went up

from the crowded mass of savages, as their chief was led forth and bound to the degrading post. But a significant clash of arms recalled them to a full sense of their helplessness.

Garcia, the giant savage who had forsworn his people, stood beside his victim, a malicious grin upon his repulsive features as he drew the long, knotted lash through his fingers, impatiently awaiting the signal that should bid him begin the barbarous work.

Pablo turned his head and gazed toward the spot where stood his judges. His voice was low, but clear and firm:

"Spaniards, you have judged me to this, but take warning in time. If I have been no warm friend of yours, it was because you kept my people in slavery. You know my influence over those poor people, and that I could have done more. They would go to certain death at my bidding."

"Strike, Garcia," angrily cried Don Manuel. "The slave is only trying to postpone his punishment. He is sentenced—carry out your orders."

"Wait—I have only a few words. I have never before borne the lash—I tell you now that you had better think twice before inflicting it. Kill me, if you will—it would be better for us both. But, so surely as there is a sun above us, just so surely will I be revenged for this degradation. If I live through it, I will exact a life for every drop of my blood. I swear it—I, chieftain of the Tejuas!"

An impatient gesture from one of the judges, and then the long lash hissed through the air, falling with a sickening sound across the prisoner's back. The skin broke—a spray of blood fell to the ground. But not a murmur went up from the chief.

A low, moaning sob broke from the huddled mass of slaves, and they swayed to and fro. A clash of arms from the opposite extremity; each soldier threw forward his gun—the men at the cannons blew their lighted matches.

A piercing shriek arrested the second stroke in mid-air. Through the line of soldiers, coming from the nearest dwelling, rushed the form of a woman.

A curse of rage broke from the lips of Don Manuel. Pablo's lips parted with a gasping breath, and then his eyes closed as his head bowed low down, an expression of acute anguish overspreading his features.

The woman darted to where stood the group of judges, and then paused, with a half-frightened glance around her.

As she stood there, the woman—for such she was, though but a girl in years—formed a rarely beautiful picture, only the more enhanced by her deep agitation.

But little above the medium height, her form was rarely developed, superbly symmetrical in every detail. A brunette of perfect type, her large lustrous eyes were now unnaturally bright, almost wild in expression. Her black hair, long and luxuriant, freed from its usual fastenings, floated over her shoulders in wild profusion. Her cheeks, usually warmly colored, were now pale, her lips ashen white.

"Father—you must not do this! Think—you

have treated him almost like your own son—now to degrade him so— My God!"

Don Manuel gave Garcia a peremptory signal. The cruel lash rose and fell. At the sickening sound a piercing shriek broke from the maiden's lips, and she sunk to the ground in a swoon.

With a bitter curse the man she had called father stooped, and raising her in his still sinewy arms, hastily bore her away from the spot.

And the horrible torture was renewed.

Bleeding, insensible, scarcely breathing, living yet seemingly dead, the tortured chieftain was released from his bonds and conveyed to a dark cell beneath the Mission-house. Though not exactly ordered to do so, Corporal Baja assumed the part of chief guard, and his men were the same who had been called forth by Don Manuel at the first disturbance.

Throughout the torture Corporal Baja had stood cold and unmoved, seemingly a man of stone, a machine utterly devoid of feeling. But no sooner was he left alone with the suffering prisoner than the mask was dropped.

Curses, deep and bitter, upon Don Manuel's head, were mingled with pitying words to the insensible chief, and with tender hands he bathed and bound up the lacerated back and shoulders.

CHAPTER II.

DECLARATION OF WAR.

For several days after this summary "example" the vigilance of the whites was redoubled. The slaves were strongly guarded night and day whether at rest or working. But the anticipated outbreak did not come.

Pablo still remained in close confinement. Corporal Baja reported him as being weak and debilitated; the effects of his severe punishment.

But one day Don Manuel overheard him giving a different report to another interested person—none other than Senorita Lota Cavella. Fortunately for the worthy Antone, only the less important portion of the message was overheard, else he might possibly have shared Pablo's imprisonment in sober earnest. As it was, Don Manuel placed another guard in his stead; one upon whom he could thoroughly depend.

The Spaniard found that one portion, at least, of his plans had miscarried. Though not positive, he had believed there was something close akin to love between Lota and Pablo, though the latter was generally looked down upon as a slave, even while, until now, he had been treated as a freeman, especially by the household of Don Cavella.

He had, when off duty, pursued the same studies with Lota and her sister Teresa, under the priests, until his education was second to none in the settlement. Little wonder, then, that a sentiment deeper and stronger than that of mere brother and sister should have grown into existence between the two young people.

Don Manuel had calculated upon rousing the fiery pride of Lota Cavella, by showing her what a vast distance separated her from Pablo. As a slave, subject to the degrading lash at any moment, surely the young chieftain would not be regarded in the same light.

Presuming upon this, the scheming Don—once

rejected—renewed his suit shortly after the "example," only to be scornfully, almost insultingly refused. In this mood was he when he overheard Antone delivering to Lota's willing ear a loving message from Pablo.

Two nights after this, vast changes were wrought in the little colony. Great excitement came with the first dawn of day.

First, Pablo was gone, his cell-door wide open, his guard lying across the threshold, stabbed to the heart. Next, fully one half of the slaves—such as were off duty during the latter half of the night—had vanished, and with them had disappeared a large portion of the four-footed stock formerly belonging to the colony.

Pursuit was organized, but without success. At a short distance from the settlement the trail divided and then ran off in a hundred different directions. One by one, these trails were followed, only to be lost, in time: not one could be traced to where the reassembly took place.

Word was sent to the colonies, and a number of slaves drafted to maintain the force absolutely necessary to keep the mine from being flooded. And while working assiduously to strengthen their defenses, the Spaniards recalled the vow of the Tejuas chief, and more than one half-believed that he would soon return to their colony, prepared to make his words good.

It was a fortnight subsequent to this wholesale escape that the first positive tidings from the fugitive chief reached the settlement, coming from one who had days since been given up as lost. This was Corporal Baja, who had been among those dispatched in pursuit, but who had not returned with the rest, and all feared that he and his command had been ambushed and cut off by the Tejuas.

On this evening, just at dusk, he rode up to the gate of the fort, soiled and travel-stained, in a sorry plight, evidently wounded in more than one place. The tidings of his return quickly spread, and he was summoned to the presence of the chief commander, Don Perez.

A folded missive that he delivered seemed to contain important tidings, for the entire council was called to meet immediately in secret session. With only Corporal Baja, besides their number, they sat with closed doors.

The message was read and duly commented upon. It came from the fugitive chieftain, and was signed "BLACK PANTHER."

Its contents amounted to a declaration of war to the death—a war of extermination!

"In my opinion 'tis all empty gasconade," uttered Don Manuel. "What can he do, with a mere handful of naked slaves, unarmed, or nearly so, against our well-trained soldiers and the cannon? Nothing. I would ask no better sport than to meet his entire force out in the open ground, with only my single command. The insolent dog!"

"You may be right, brother," cautiously observed another of the council. "But let us hear Corporal Baja's report in full. He must have gained a fair idea of their strength and resources while held a captive."

"You hear, sirrah?" hoarsely added Don Manuel, turning to the soldier. "Tell us all, and speak the truth, or it will be the worse for you. Speak out and plainly."

"It needs not such fierce words, Don Manuel, to make me speak the truth," coolly returned Corporal Antone. "I am an old soldier, and have seen service while you were but a boy. Colonel Perez can bear witness as to whether I am one to be frightened at a shadow."

"True, corporal, I know you well. Though you may be over-fond of drink, and given to loose practices at times, yet, while on duty, I know no man in the colony whom I would sooner trust. Go on, and give your report in your own way. You shall not be interrupted—only be as brief as possible," interposed the military chief.

"Thanks, colonel. Well, as you know, I was among those sent in pursuit of the runaways. I chose my own men, and when the trail divided, we selected one of the many, and trailed it up. With us Pepe, the Rastreador (tracker, or trail-hunter), and his skill led us through the worst.

"The rascals were cunning, for what they covered in less than one day, we were three in tracing out, but never once was Pepe fairly at fault. Then the divided trail began to grow together again, and that difficulty was past. But we were alone—seven of us—and it was necessary to use great caution, for once discovered, the slaves would make but one mouthful of the party.

"In the hills beyond the Santa Marie, we came upon them. They had gone into camp, and were building quarters, as though they meant to settle there for good. As we lay hiding, spying out their movements, one thing puzzled me, until Pepe explained its meaning. Upon three hill-tops fires were kept burning, the smoke, black and thick, showing clear to the clouds above. Pepe said these were signals to call together their allies.

"On the second day we were discovered and surrounded before we knew our danger. The men fought well, and made their marks deep upon the heathen crowd, but twenty to one—what could we do? One by one went down, though the slaves seemed to use care in their blows, not to kill. I soon found out what this was for.

"Disarmed and bound, we were kept close prisoners for two days and nights, without food or drink. Then he whom we knew here as Pablo, the half-blood, came and set us free, in so far as the thongs of skin were concerned. With two heathen savages guarding each one of us, their stone hatchets held ready for use, they led us out from the hole. A great crowd was assembled in the open space, and it looked dark for us poor devils, for not one but believed we were to be put to death."

"But you were not—hasten with your report and leave off these idle ramblings," impatiently cried Don Manuel.

"Peace, brother. Go on, corporal," said Don Perez.

"I will make it as brief as I can. Pepe told me this was one of their councils. Half a dozen or so of the heathens made speeches, and Pepe gave me an idea of their meaning. They one and all swore allegiance to Pablo—or Black Panther, as they called him—and promised the aid of their braves to free his people and exterminate the white men—meaning you here.

"Then Pablo took me aside and gave me that message in writing, with another one which I

was to repeat by word of mouth in case I should lose the paper. I was to tell you all that I had witnessed, and what I had heard. That he had nearly a thousand warriors who would obey him to the death. If you consented to his terms, all well and good. If not, then he would come with those at his back who would enforce them.

"He gave me my horse, and bade me depart. When I asked for my comrades, he said they were prisoners, and that unless you sent him your answer within two weeks, they would be roasted alive at the stake. That was yesterday morning.

"Colonel, you have my report."

"Very well; you may go now."

The terms contained in the letter referred to were plain and pointed. Black Panther was evidently in earnest.

He demanded the immediate release of all his people now held in slavery by the Spaniards. If not, then he would sweep the oppressors from the face of the earth. Their final decision he must have within two weeks from the date of inditing the terms, or the six soldiers held as hostages would be put to the torture and an immediate assault follow.

Leaving them earnestly discussing the dilemma, Corporal Antone turned away and left the Mission-house. Instead of seeking the quarters where his fellow soldiers were impatiently awaiting his appearance, eager to hear the story of his adventures, he hastened toward the dwelling of Don Cavella.

Pausing beside the garden wall, a peculiar whistle broke from his lips, and with a celerity that plainly showed his signal was expected, the little wicket was flung open, and a pair of plump arms were flung around his neck. A pair of plump lips buried themselves deep in his shaggy beard, and a plump form very comfortably filled his arms.

Even had this scene been witnessed by other than the moon and laughing stars, it would have caused little surprise, for few of the colony but knew that stout Corporal Baja had surrendered at discretion to the roguish little Dolores, maid to Lota and Teresa Cavella.

"Is it true, Antone, that you have really seen Don Pablo?" breathlessly asked Dolores, as her little feet once more touched the ground.

"You too, little one? What is he more than other men, that all women can think of nothing else?"

"Now don't tease—you know why I ask. She is anxious. Tell me."

"Yes, I have. And more—here is a message that he enjoined me to deliver in person. The direction reads—there! By our lady, little one, I'm too weak with hunger and thirst to read the words!"

Dolores laughed, but the hint was understood. In a minute more Antone was seated before a bountiful supply of viands, while the tiny package was on its way to the one for whom it was intended.

Lota Cavella and Teresa, her sister, were seated together in an inner chamber, that overlooked the garden. Each appeared ill at ease, though striving to conceal their impatience from the other. For the first time in their lives the sisters had secrets not mutually shared.

The dimly burning wax tapers cast a subdued glow over them, as they sat in silence.

A brief description has already been given of Lota, the eldest of the two. Teresa, in almost every detail, was the exact opposite of her sister.

She sat beside the jalousied window, gazing out upon the night, one slippered foot impatiently tapping the floor. The telltale color came and went from her face, time and again. Only for her own agitation, Lota could not but have observed this perturbation, so foreign to the usually placid Teresa.

The younger sister did not appear a child of that tropic clime. Her complexion, white and pure as marble, lacked that rich, ruddy tinge peculiar to the Hispano-American race. Her long hair was of a rich, golden hue, wavy and crinkling. Her eyes blue, large and lustrous. Her form tall and slender, yet symmetrically proportioned, with a languid, willowy grace very different from the fiery liveness that marked her sister, who was true Spanish in every characteristic.

"Dolores?"

"Yes—it is I," and the maid glided into the room. "Dear mistress, may I ask a favor?" and she crouched down at the feet of Lota, one plump paw resting lightly upon the lady's hand.

"Two, if you wish," laughed Lota, but flushing quickly as she concealed the billet that slipped from Dolores's fingers.

"One will do. Antone—Corporal Baja, you know, my mistress—has returned, and he has met with marvelous adventures that I am crazy to hear, but the poor fellow is almost starved and swears he is too faint to tell them until he has gone to the quarters for food. May I—?"

"Yes—especially as I see you *have*, already, or mine ears deceive me. That clattering sounds wondrous like the labors of a famished man," laughed Lota. "But go keep him company, pet, and let me know when he is satisfied. There are some questions I would ask him."

Dolores kissed the trembling hand, and then darted away. Teresa gave a convulsive start as a sound from without met her ears; though it was one very common to that time and place—the low call of the night-hawk.

With a murmured excuse she arose and glided from the room. Lota smiled faintly, and then eagerly opened the crumpled note. Its contents may only be surmised from her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

Teresa glided out from the house, with only a passing glance at the soldier lover.

The whistle of the night-hawk was an expected signal, and she was hastening to a lover's rendezvous.

"My angel!"

"Fabian!"

A tall, graceful form sprung out from behind the little vine-covered arbor near the foot of the garden, and clasped Teresa to his bosom. Confidingly she yielded to his embrace, and as her eyes were uplifted to his, a mustached lip touched hers.

Tremblingly Teresa shrunk back, and the strong arms quickly released her. He stood as if rebuked, though his eyes gleamed with a light of deep, passionate love. The young couple had

not journeyed far along love's flowery path, and this kiss was the first that had ever passed between them.

"Pardon, my Teresa—I did not mean to offend," he murmured in a low tone. "You looked so like an angel in this beautiful moonlight, that I forgot myself. Please forgive me?"

"On condition you do not forget yourself again," and Teresa laughed slightly, half ashamed that she did not feel more anger, instead of the wild, peculiar sensation of bliss that thrilled her veins.

Together, hand in hand, the young couple entered the leafy arbor, and there seated side by side they conversed in low tones upon all those little topics so pleasing to lovers, but which sound so insipid when set down in black and white.

The future seemed very bright before them; not a single cloud dimmed the horizon of their hopes. Don Fabian was the only son of the principal owner of the silver mine, respected by all for his courage, generosity and other good qualities.

Though they made themselves delightfully miserable by conjuring up scores of impossibilities in the way of opposition from and persecutions by hard-hearted parents, there was little foundation for such ideas. Don Cavella would be only too glad to give his consent to a union with the house of Don Perez.

Unheeding the lapse of time, mindful only of the presence of each other, the lovers loitered on in blissful ignorance of the impending danger that threatened them. They knew not that the garden gate swung open to admit a dark figure that crouched low down amidst the shrubbery, and then glided like the shadow of death toward the little arbor.

Slowly, inch by inch, the death-shadow crawled around toward the entrance, its progress almost imperceptible, silent as the motion of a summer's cloud athwart the heavens. The moonlight revealed the naked figure, shining as though oiled, muscular and symmetrical, like an image of bronze. One hand clutched a long knife, the other dragged his body along.

The entrance was gained—a long pause.

Then the death-shadow sprang erect, and bounded forward with a snarl of deadly hatred; a howling cry not unlike that of a wild beast.

A piercing shriek—the rustle of garments—the sound of a heavy blow—then another scream and an angry cry, as the forms of two men fell without the arbor in a death-grapple.

Within, a pale and motionless form, the red life-blood staining the light garments that covered her breast; the form of Teresa Cavella.

Without, two strong men engaged in a struggle, breathing hard, their teeth gritting, their muscles straining and cracking, as they desperately strove for the mastery. The forms of an Indian and a white man—of the death-shadow, and Don Fabian.

Strong and active, well versed in the wrestler's arts, the Spaniard quickly found himself overmatched, for the sleek, oiled skin of the savage baffled all efforts to maintain his grip. Twisting, writhing like an eel, the assassin persistently glided from beneath the Spaniard,

whose superior strength would as often recover the vantage thus lost.

Don Fabian dared not attempt drawing a weapon, lest the venomous knife that glittered in the savage's hand should be buried in his body. Thus, with one hand clutching the assassin's wrist, he strove to hold the Indian with his other while he called aloud for assistance.

The alarm had been given the household, and excited voices were heard coming from there, in answer to Fabian's calls. Rendered desperate by this danger, the savage dropped his knife, and wrenched his hand free from the Spaniard's grip. Then his hard fist smote Fabian a fearful blow full in the face, that half stunned him.

But the momentary delay in searching for his knife proved fatal to the assassin. Even as his arm uplifted, a crashing step echoed close behind him, and there came what seemed a flash of lightning.

The footstep was that of Corporal Baja, and as his quick eye detected the murderer's intention, his ready arm frustrated it. One sweep of his heavy sword and the savage sunk heavily forward, his skull cloven to the chin.

Fabian sprung to his feet with a cry of agony, and darted into the arbor. He believed that Teresa was dead.

But fortunately such was not the case. The maiden's eyes slowly unclosed, and as they rested upon the features of the young man, a low, glad cry broke from her lips; a cry of heartfelt thanksgiving.

The household was soon thoroughly aroused, and by Lota's orders, Teresa was conveyed at once to her chamber, where her wound was looked to.

To the great relief of all, this was found to be a mere trifle, scarcely more than skin deep.

Blushing deeply, she confessed to Lota the truth, that when the assassin appeared, she thought only of Fabian's danger, and flung herself upon his breast, to shield his life with her own. The descending blow passed between the two, being arrested by the Indian's wrist striking heavily upon his shoulder, even as the keen blade pierced her breast. Before a second blow, Fabian grappled with the savage, when Teresa swooned from pain and terror.

An examination of the corpse tended in a great measure to quell the excitement this murderous assault occasioned, for, naturally, it had been connected with the insolent message of Black Panther. But instead, it proved to be a mere personal grudge. Don Fabian having had occasion to sentence an unruly slave to the lash, the savage had attempted his life, in revenge.

CHAPTER III.

THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM.

A SINGLE horseman, slowly riding over a grassy, gently undulating plain of several miles in extent, studded hither and yon with dark islands—a "timber prairie." The sun has long since passed its meridian, and the rapidly-lengthening shadows warn the traveler to mind his pace.

And yet he has not the appearance of a traveler—in the ordinary acceptation of the term. Though heavily loaded, he does not

bear the paraphernalia essential to camping-life on the prairie.

There are no water-gourds—no blanket—no pouch containing flint, steel and tinder. Food there is in abundance; securely strapped to the horse's croup is the carcass of a fine, fat deer.

This betrays his identity; no traveler, but a hunter.

A lasso of braided horse-skin hung to the high pommel; a short, heavy carbine rested before the rider's thighs; the butts of a knife and heavy pistol protruded from the belt at his waist. Peeping from beneath the coiled lasso is a goodly-sized earthen bottle, whose contents are far more powerful than water, to judge by the actions of the rider.

"By'r Lady! but the sun's in great haste for bed, to-night. Come, come, this will never do—Antone, thou rascal, make haste, or Dolores will have a fine lecture for thee!"

Corporal Baja—for it was indeed that worthy, touched up his horse with the long spurs that armed his heels, but the jaded beast soon fell into its former slow walk, evidently completely exhausted. Weary chase of the fleet-footed deer, under the blazing sun, had been too much for its powers.

"Ha! curses on my blind folly!" cried Antone, as he turned hastily in the saddle, and glanced keenly to his left. "Indians—on the war-path, most likely—and I have only a used-up horse! Ha! 'tis so—they see me and—devil roast this beast! a terrapin could lend him wings!" and the thoroughly-aroused soldier spurred and flogged the animal, until it broke into a spasmodic gallop.

From out a motte to his left, distant not more than a mile there filed a body of horsemen, not less than two-score in number, whose plumed crests and tall spears proclaimed them Indians, beyond a doubt upon the war-path. That they had observed the Spaniard was plain, for with yells that soared across the intervening distance, even to the ears of their anticipated victim, the savages dashed forward at a gallop, yet keeping in close rank as regular and systematic as the best trained soldiery.

For the first few minutes the words and looks of Antone were those of a very craven, but this was only for a short time; then he recovered, in great measure, his usual *nonchalant* demeanor. With a quick glance at the oncoming savages, he unslung his carbine from its rest, and coolly inspected its priming.

Settling himself firmly in his seat, Antone loosened the weapons at his waist. A peculiar sound caught his ear and a grim smile swept athwart his rugged features.

"Though the heathen devils gain my scalp, curse me if their throats be any cooler for their work. Next to those of Dolores, the lips of a bottle taste sweetest!"

With this characteristic speech, Antone raised the bottle to his lips and drained the contents, then cast the empty vessel away. As though this was a signal, the poor beast abruptly paused with a deep groan, its feet widely braced as though to prevent its falling from exhaustion.

"So—it's to end here, then!" muttered Antone at this event, his keen eyes seeing that the tortured animal was unable to proceed further

without rest. "Well, a soldier ought to fight as well in one spot as another. Corporal Baja, do your duty!"

The soldier sprung from his horse and facing the rapidly-approaching Indians, leveled his carbine over the saddle, as composed as he would have been on parade.

A grim smile curled his huge mustache as the Indians abruptly halted, while yet beyond fair range. Then one of their number rode leisurely forward with both hands clasped above his head; the pantomimic signal of peace.

"That reads '*a friend*,' but his hands may say one thing and his heart another. However, so long as the rest keep their distance, I won't let one heathen outdo me," muttered Antone, as he lowered his carbine and stepped before his living barricade.

Raising his right hand with open palm turned toward the savage, he slowly moved it to and fro, from right to left. As if in answer, a shrill, peculiar cry came from the savage, at which Antone gave a convulsive start.

"Can it be—and I like a blind fool running from him? Yes—'tis Don Pablo—the Black Panther!" and then, as if satisfied, the soldier uttered a quick shout.

In another minute the two men were clasping hands. Though now in the full paraphernalia of a Tejuas chieftain upon the war-path, it was none other than the half-blood whom we first witnessed in slavery.

His tall, symmetrical figure was bare to the waist, excepting only a robe resting carelessly upon one shoulder, being an entire skin of the black jaguar. Upon his broad, swelling chest was depicted with vivid skill a panther rending the throat of a white man, beside whom lay the peculiar device of Don Manuel. The long, wavy hair hung free and unconfined save by a simple ribbon; one that had in times gone by served a similar duty for Lota Cavella. Slung to the saddle was a richly ornamented carbine; one hand held a long spear with pointed steel head; a bow and well filled quiver hung at his back; a knife and stone hatchet depended from the girdle at his waist.

"Chief," gravely uttered Antone, "I am glad to see *you*—but not those braves. Your message said two weeks; this is only the second day."

"Rest easy, good Antone," replied Black Panther. "I am bound upon a mission of peace, unless first assailed. All Spaniards are not like you, else affairs would never have taken this turn. But let that pass. I came to learn the answer of the pale-faces."

"I can not give it, because the commandante has not yet made it known. You will have to wait until the end of the time set by yourself."

"Not so. I did not expect you would know. I am going to visit the Spaniard and learn their answer from his own lips."

Antone listened in mute amazement, but Black Panther only smiled.

"Pablo, are you mad?" at length said the soldier. "Are you weary of life that you run your head into the noose like that?"

"No—I have much to live for, yet. But there is no danger—you forget the treaty?"

"You forget—not I. Do you think they would allow you to escape, were you once fairly

within their power? If any excuse was needed, they'd say the treaty was all on one side—that they had promised nothing, and laugh at your folly, even as they killed you, or else kept you as surety 'gainst any further trouble with your people. No, Pablo. You must see how foolish this all is. I am your friend—if I were not, I would advise you to do this, for with you dead or in their power, the colony could laugh to scorn your people. Think! it would be certain death!"

"You mean well, friend Antone, and I thank you. Nevertheless, I shall visit them this night, alone, and return as I entered, unharmed. But now I ask a favor of you—will you grant it?"

"Yes—if it may be done by a soldier without dishonor. I love you, Pablo, as a brother, but I am the enemy of all others who fight against our standard. If ever we come to blows I shall strike my best, though *your* life is safe from me," earnestly uttered the corporal.

"Good! I like you the better for your brave words, Antone. But listen. I do not ask you to do aught that can possibly work your honor harm. I only ask you to give this billet to Senorita Lota Cavella."

Antone gazed keenly up into the face of Black Panther. An expression of doubt filled his eyes, that the chief read aright.

"Trust me, my friend. I mean no harm. I swear to you that I would sooner abandon all hopes of freeing my people, than that harm should come to *her*. No, you can take this without doubt. Read it, if you will. It only requests an interview beside the *arroyo* banks."

"I will trust you, Pablo. But, understand me. I love Senorita Lota even as I love our Blessed Lady, and those who think to work her ill have me for an enemy. I did think, for a moment, that you meant to carry her into captivity, to aid you in your designs against the Colony."

"You wronged me, then. No, deeply as I love her, if ever she comes to me, it must be willingly. Then you will take the note?"

"Yes. But lend me a horse. Mine is broken down, and if I go afoot, the lady will have retired before I can get there. You can get it again at the *arroyo*."

The deer was quickly strapped upon a fresh horse, an Indian dismounting for that purpose, and then Antone rode rapidly away toward the fort, followed at some little distance by the dusky troop under lead of Black Panther.

At the *arroyo* Antone dismounted and tethered the horse, knowing that his riding a strange animal into the fort would lead to questions and suspicions that he might find hard to avert. Entering the quarters, he dropped the deer, saying that, his horse giving out, he had abandoned it upon the prairie, to follow at will.

He presently slipped away unobserved, and hastened to the garden gate, where a signal speedily brought Dolores to his side. After a bear-like hug, he sent the maid in with the note.

Lota was not a little disturbed by its contents and for a time was thoroughly nonplused. Not that any doubt as to Pablo's honesty of purpose obtruded, but she realized how difficult it would be for her to gain the rendezvous unseen, and

should she be discovered by her father, his rage would be terrible.

The note requested an interview with both herself and sister. In that lay the greatest difficulty. She feared that Teresa, still suffering from the affright experienced two nights before, would not have the courage to go with her.

There were no secrets now between the sisters. In telling her story, Teresa was forced to acknowledge her love for Fabian, and thus encouraged, Lota reciprocated the confidence, and avowed the attachment between Pablo and herself.

Thus, her mind once resolved, Lota lost no time in broaching the subject to Teresa, showing her the note received. Though feeling a vague doubt, Teresa consented, and the two, closely wrapped up to avoid discovery, speedily joined Antone.

The four figures—for Dolores had persisted in accompanying her mistress—succeeded in passing the quarters without discovery, and in a very few minutes were at the little stream, where Pablo joined them. His meeting with Lota was somewhat constrained, owing to the presence of others, but then, drawing a little aside, they conversed more freely.

"Lota," said Pablo, after a time, "you can trust me?"

"With my life."

"Thanks, darling. I am about to test your affection, though I wish it could be avoided. You will not judge me too harshly?"

"Pablo!"

"Lota, I am going to enter the fort or the Mission, wherever the council may meet."

"No, no—you must not—they will kill you!"

"Listen, Lota. I have an object in this, and it must be done. I know that, under ordinary circumstances, my life would pay the forfeit, whether I came under a flag of truce or not, for they have proclaimed me an outlaw, with a price set on my head. But you can avert this danger. Will you do it, Lota?"

"I—but how, Pablo?" faltered the bewildered maiden.

"Understand, I must meet them, whether you consent or refuse. I must learn their answer to my terms. With your aid I can do so without danger; otherwise it will be more difficult.

What I ask is this: Will you consent to wait here with your sister and the others until my return? It will not be long; they will not dare detain me when I tell them you two are held as hostages for my safety. Do you understand, darling?"

"Yes—I will trust you, Pablo. I do not believe that you would deceive me. Go—we will remain here. Only hasten."

"One thing more—tell this to your friends, that they may be convinced no wrong is intended them."

Of the quartette, only Antone seemed to distrust. It appeared like thrusting his head into a double noose. Even if there was nothing to fear from the savages, how could he explain his noiseless capture to his commander? How improbable that a stout soldier of his skill and address could be overcome and conveyed past the busy quarters, almost within eyesight of a score of men, and yet be unable to give the alarm,

"I would be accused of treason, and be shot like a dog," he muttered, gloomily.

"You must not run this risk for us, good Antone," said Lota, firmly. "You must return to the quarters at once. It will be better for us all. Besides, your single arm could avail us nothing here, if treachery was intended."

"Lotta!"

"I said if, Pablo. I trust you fully."

Teresa and Dolores were not a little frightened, but it was finally decided that Antone should go. As he disappeared Pablo gave a signal, and his braves came up. Seated upon horseback, the maidens were taken across the *arroyo*, and then after a whispered order to his men and a silent pressure of Lota's hand, Black Panther turned and proceeded toward the fort.

After some little parley he was admitted within the walls, where he was confronted by Colonel Perez, who first recognized the Tejuas chieftain. His hand dropped to his sword-hilt, but Black Panther quickly uttered:

"Stay, Colonel Perez. Do not do in haste that for which you would afterward be sorry. I come alone, on a mission of peace. I trusted in the honor of the Spaniards to observe the treaty we have made."

"What is your object in coming here? You know that you are outlawed, with a price set upon your head!" sternly demanded the commandante.

"I came to see if we can not arrange some terms by which we need not take each other's lives. Peace is better than war. I wish to meet your council in treaty. Do you agree? Or have you decided upon war at any and all risks?"

"We have not decided finally. You allowed us two weeks in which to give an answer. The time is not up yet."

"True, but I have other terms to offer. I will state them to you, if you insist, but would rather speak in the presence of all, that there may be no unnecessary delay."

"I will summon them, though by so doing, your danger is increased. There are those who will be strongly tempted to assault you—Don Manuel especially."

"I have a safeguard that will satisfy even him," quietly replied Black Panther.

Colonel Perez looked surprised at this confident speech, but immediately dispatched a messenger for the council to assemble at the Mission-house. His word was law, and the call was promptly obeyed.

As Don Manuel observed Black Panther, a cry of angry vengeance burst from his lips, and drawing his sword, he sprung forward with a hissing curse. Nothing loth, the chieftain whipped forth his knife, but the tall figure of Colonel Perez sprung between them with bared sword.

"Back, Don Manuel!—back, sir! You shall not disgrace us by attacking a flag of truce. Back, I say, or you must do with me!" he cried sternly with flashing eyes.

"He is an outlaw slave—a dog; he should be treated as a dog!" gritted the enraged Spaniard.

"Silence! command your tongue or leave the chamber. And you, sir, would be wise were you less hasty in flashing steel. One drop of

blood shed here would seal your fate," he added turning toward Black Panther.

"As I told you before, I have a safeguard that you little dream of. But an insult from him I can not and will not bear. However, let that pass. I have little time for dallying. I come upon business.

"Spaniards, I come to you either as a friend or as an enemy, just as you may elect. When I go from here it will be decided which path I am to follow. Which do you elect?"

"You said you had terms to offer—state them first, coldly uttered the commandante.

"Very well. As you know, I am head chieftain of the tribe of Tejuas. Besides these I have other allies. In all, I can, to-day, lead over one thousand true and trusty braves upon the war-path. In two weeks I can double this number. You number some two hundred men on whom you can rely. You can count the odds for yourselves.

"You hold some of my people as slaves. I demand their release. I do not ask anything more. What you have already wrung from their blood and lives, you may keep. I only ask that they be set free, and then we are quits. You can remain here or not, as you choose. That does not concern us, as the country is wide and we can find other homes. This is my demand."

"And if we refuse?"

"Then I will sound the war-cry and trust to our arms to win what we ask. Only, then it will be too late to talk of mercy. It will be a *war of extermination*—in which either the pale-faces or the red-men must be swept from the face of the earth."

"To listen one would think we were the dogs and he master supreme!" sneered Don Manuel. "'Tis a new turn that forces Spanish gentlemen to swallow such scurvy words from the lips of a nameless half-blood!"

"He is outlawed—a price upon his head. Down with the slave! Does the council retract their order to that effect?" significantly muttered another.

"With their leader down, the other varlets would not dare make us trouble. The opportunity lies in our hands—down with—"

"Hold, gentlemen—remember what and where you are," cried the commandante, springing to his feet.

Black Panther stood unmoved, a scornful smile curling his thin lips, as he gazed upon the inflamed faces of his enemies.

"Make way, gentlemen. The one who lifts a weapon against him must first strike me!" sternly cried Colonel Perez; then adding, to Black Panther: "Come—follow closely in my steps. I will see you safe outside, though it costs my life. Hasten—a minute may be too late!"

"Thanks; you, at least, are a gentleman of honor. But fear not for me. I have a safeguard that even the most bloodthirsty Spaniard here can respect. The blow that strikes me will fall more heavily upon their own heads. If I die, I will have most glorious company along the shadowy trail," and Black Panther laughed mockingly.

"What do you mean?"

"That I am not so simple as you supposed. I knew that you would think me essential to my people's cause; so much so, that in my death or capture you would be saved from the peril that now threatens you. Knowing, too, that you had proclaimed me an outlaw, I would have been very simple to have ventured into your power without some assurance that my life would not pay the forfeit. That security I have. My body-guard are counting the minutes that I am away. When they have counted a certain number, they will know that I am either dead or held a captive. That moment seals the fate of two of your friends—of the Senorita Lota and Teresa Cavella," and again Black Panther laughed, more cold and sneeringly.

Consternation seized upon the assembly. They stared aghast at each other.

"A lie—an accursed lie!" gasped Don Cavella.

"Not so—'tis the truth. But I do not ask you to believe me. Go, or send a messenger, and see if they be at home. They are where you will never see or hear of them again, living, until I return scathless to my braves. Then they may return free, unharmed by me or mine."

While he was speaking, Don Cavella rushed from the chamber, and soon found that the half-blood's words were only too true. Almost distracted, he returned, and rushed after Black Panther.

"Devil—viper—my children! Give me my children!" he gasped, chokingly. "I will make you rich—demand your ransom; I will pay it; only give me back my children!"

"I am not a Spaniard," coolly replied Black Panther. "I do not ask gold and silver for a man's heart-blood. Your daughters are safe as long as you will it so. When I have learned your answer to my terms, I will go and send them to you."

"A foul snare!" cried Don Manuel. "He only seeks to save his own vile life, and then will carry them away with him. Trust him not; truth does not lie in the varlet's body!"

"For that and other matters you will be called to account, Don Manuel, before many days. Your life is forfeited—see! I swear it. Even as you see it here upon my breast, that will be your doom!" sternly uttered Black Panther, his eyes glowing with a deadly light.

"Explain this," said Colonel Perez, motioning silence. "You say that these ladies are in your power?"

"Yes. I captured them, foreseeing that I would need some such safeguard to preserve my life. They are now in the hands of my braves, who have strict orders to slay them if I do not return in a certain time, or if any of your men should attempt to surprise them. My word is law to them."

"When you leave this, what do you intend doing?"

"I will return to my braves and at once release the captives."

"Can we trust you to do this?"

"Yes. Frankly, how can you do otherwise? Any move with intent to rescue, on your part,

would only be fatal to them. But come—time presses. Your answer to my terms?"

"We must have time to consult. Before the two weeks are up you shall receive our final answer, either here or in your own stronghold."

"Very well. I will go, now. Until that time it is peace between us. I shall not deal any blow, and if you do, that will be the signal for war—a war of extermination. You understand me?"

The commandante bowed.

"In fifteen minutes the señoritas will be with you. *Adios!*" and, with a mocking bow, Black Panther strode from the room.

Hastening to the rendezvous, he found the two sisters very anxious at his long delay. With a glad cry Lota sprang forward, and was clasped to his breast.

Hurriedly Pablo related the result of his mission, and then bade her farewell. Their lips met in one long, lingering kiss of love, and then he led the sisters across the stream.

A hasty parting, and then he sprang over the arroyo and leaped into the saddle. Like phantoms the dusky troop thundered away over the prairie, vanishing amidst the gloom.

CHAPTER IV.

A STARTLING DISCLOSURE.

HUMAN links of a living chain, the phantom riders sped on through the night. Nor did their leader draw rein until the gray light of coming day shone momentarily clearer from beyond the eastern hills.

The sun was just appearing when Black Panther rode into the Tejuas village. This was now on quite an extensive scale, and several varieties of lodges could be distinguished, gathered in clusters, telling that other tribes had flocked to the standard of the half-blood.

Well might the Spaniards grow uneasy. A storm was gathering that bade fair to sweep them all into eternity.

As Black Panther dismounted before his lodge, the figure of a woman met him, and then the curtain of skins fell behind them both. This woman was a remarkable-looking person, and merits a brief description.

Tall—far beyond the usual height of woman—straight and erect as a mountain-ash, her still richly-developed form gave no evidence of decay, although fully half a century had passed over her head.

Her hair, still luxuriant as in youth, hung below her waist, black as the crow's wing, confined only by a band of beaten gold, not unlike a coronet. Her eyes, large and expressive, were now filled with a tender, loving light, not un-mixed with a proud triumph, as they dwelt upon the Tejuas chieftain. In youth she must have been possessed of beauty remarkable as an Indian—for she was still handsome, though age or suffering had given a stern cast to her features.

This was the mother of Black Panther. Her Indian name—Mera-silla—signified, when translated, Still Water.

Together the two conversed long and earnestly, Black Panther narrating his adventures at the Spanish colony. A sudden change came

over Still Water's features as he alluded to Lota Cavella; an expression of mingled hatred and fear.

"With those two in your power you could have demanded the release of our people, and not have been refused. Was my son blind that he let such an opportunity slip his grasp?" slowly uttered Mera-silla.

"Mother," replied Black Panther, the glow of his eyes softening. "I was yet a child when you fled from the colony. Of all that happened me since then I have told you, save one thing. I would not mention that then, but I can now, because I have found that my heart did not deceive me. Mother, listen:

"You know of my life while with the accursed Spaniards. They treated me wondrously well, when they knew that the detested *slave-blood* flowed in my veins. Don Cavella treated me almost as kindly as he did his hound—his favorite horses. He gave me the privilege of studying with his daughters; in payment, I was to be their servant.

"As I grew older, he had me appointed an overseer, above my own people. At least they had one taskmaster who could feel for them—one who did not repay every groan with the cruel lash.

"When you fled, years ago, there were two little girls in the house of Don Cavella. You may remember how lovely they were then, but you can have no idea of what they are now. I can not tell you—some time, maybe, I will show you. Mother, you know what I would say? I began to love where I should hate—to love and be loved in return. You see, I am frank, I loved Lota Cavella, and—she loved me."

A low cry broke from Still Water's lips, so full of anguish and despair that Black Panther sprang to his feet in alarm. But though her eyes were widely distended, her features strangely convulsed, Mera-silla motioned him back, her form quivering violently.

"Mother, you are ill—"

"No—no," gasped the woman, in a constrained voice. "It is nothing—only your words. You do not—Pablo, my son, as you love me, tell me you do not mean this—tell me they were but idle words! You do not—can not love the child of the betrayer of our race?"

"Mother, I spoke the truth. I do love her—she loves me—and, God willing, she will become my wife when this work is done; when our people are set free from the bonds of the accursed Spaniards."

"No, Pablo, that can never be," slowly uttered Still Water, her voice calm and low, though the great drops stood thickly out upon her forehead.

"Can never be? Mother, you forget. It will be. Until this last visit, I myself had doubts, but that is gone now. I have but to say the word, and my darling will come. But fear not—my people first; then myself. Until they are free I will wait," uttered Black Panther.

"Longer—promise me that you will not—Pablo, my son, forget this wild dream while you can. Shut it out from your heart. Think no more of what would be a crime—"

"Mother!"

"Pablo, spare me!" groaned Still Water, fall-

ing at the feet of Black Panther, her voice quivering, her form trembling like an aspen.

"Tell me what this means—*now*, *now*. Tell me your meaning. Why must I no longer think of her—in what would it be a *crime*?" sternly cried the young chieftain.

Mera-silla raised her hand and tossed back the long black hair, but the words she would have uttered died away upon her tongue. Black Panther stood by in mute amazement; never before had he known her so completely overcome.

"Mother, you are ill. Go and lie down. Some other time you can tell me this. I will wait."

"No; as well now as hereafter. To wait will only make it the more difficult. Sit down and listen. I will tell you all—everything. But do not look at me so—your eyes cut my heart like a knife. Sit down—'twill not take long, though it is a story of life-long bitterness."

With difficulty calming himself, Black Panther crouched silently down upon a pile of skins, his eyes bent upon the ground. Still Water, her gaze fixed upon vacancy, began her story in a low, monotonous tone.

"Years and years ago, long before you were born, this country was filled only with one race. These hills—to the right, left, all around, the level prairies, all the grounds that could be covered by a strong, swift horse in two days, go in which direction he might, belonged to the Tejuas. We were happy, then, and no thoughts of war disturbed us, for the hatchet was buried with every tribe around. But the evil eye was already upon us, though we knew it not then.

"Achiganaga was the great chief, then, and I was his favorite squaw. Peace," with a wave of her hand, as Black Panther looked up and was about to speak; "you shall know all soon. Though you curse me and drive me from you in loathing, I will speak the truth. You should have learned it before, but better now than too late.

"Then the Spaniards came. Not with such a fierce look as they wear now. They came with lying smiles, holding their weapons behind them, waving a white skin to throw dust into the red-men's eyes. I need not tell you that they succeeded. But all was different, then.

"The white faces were few and weak, but they were very cunning. They met the Tejuas chieftains in council and blinded their senses with singing words. They were good friends, come to teach the Indians useful arts.

"Achiganaga believed these words, and ordered his braves to help the pale-faces. They built strong stone wigwams—you have seen some of them; others are to the south, east and west of us. Not only the Tejuas, but all their allies helped on with the work that when done was to be their prisons! They toiled like slaves, eager to prove their friendship to the Spaniards. And how was this rewarded? Wait—I will tell you.

"More of the Spaniards came, bringing strange-looking things besides their weapons, with which they began to tear up the ground. At first the red-men did not like this, but here again soft words deceived them and they helped to dig their own graves. Then the blow fell.

"It was nearly time for the fall hunts, and some of the mountain tribes had already taken

up the trail to their homes, to prepare for the chase. But the Spaniards said to the others—wait. They would give us a great feast, that all might be glad. Even here the red-men had all the work to do. They were the hunters; they brought in the game while the black-hearted Spaniards were preparing for their destruction.

"All of the chieftains were gathered in the stone lodges, to meet in council, as they believed. That was the trap. The doors were closed. Being at peace, they had lain aside their weapons. At a signal the Spaniards sprung upon and bound them. While doing this, others had seized upon the arms of the braves, and had hidden them.

"Two pale-faces held each chief as they stepped upon the wall where the red-men could see them. Then the white chief spoke. He pointed to the captives—aid that with the first attempt at rescue, they would each one be stabbed or shot to death.

"Achiganaga was one of the captives, but his big heart did not feel fear. He raised his voice and pealed forth the war-cry, calling upon his people to charge. He was obeyed; the braves paused, with groans of sorrow, at their second step.

"The white chief raised his long knife, and six of the captives were murdered. Achiganaga had grappled with his guards, and though one shot him, while the other buried a long knife in his side, he did not die. He sounded the war-cry again and again. Then he fell, bleeding—dying, as it seemed.

"The Tejuas saw all this, and it maddened them. Hot for revenge they sprung forward, though their hands were naked. But death was all around them. Betrayed, they could do nothing. Unable to reach their enemies, they died by scores, massacred without mercy.

"The thunder-guns of the stone lodges sent death to them. The white braves shot them from the wigwams. And then the men with long knives rushed upon their children and squaws. The white chief ordered them to surrender, or else these would be killed. What could they do? Nothing. For their lives they had fought—now for their hearts they surrendered!"

Still Water's voice trembled and died away in a low sob. Black Panther sat motionless, but his hands clinched, his bosom heaved, and his teeth gritted revengefully, as he hearkened to this tale of treachery and wrong.

"It is a sad tale, my son," at length resumed the woman, "but it must be told. You have never heard it all, and it will nerve your arm to strike heavily for vengeance, and, too, you will see why I warned you against a *crime*.

"The Spaniards first bound our people, hand and foot together, while the big guns were kept pointed at them. Then the women and children were gathered together and shut up from the rest. The white chief told the unhappy red-men what this was for, that at the first word or sign of rebellion, their dear ones should die!

"My son, what could they do? Think—those whom they held more dear than life itself, tremblingly lying beneath the cruel knives—what could they do? Only the one thing. They sub-

mitted; not for their own lives, but for the sake of those helpless ones.

"I was one of those captives, but I knew nothing of this until it was all over. When my chief fell, bleeding—dying, as I believed—my heart gave way and a cloud came over my eyes. Better had I died then; but the Great Spirit willed different.

"I was sent for to nurse Achiganaga, for the Spaniards knew that his life would be their safe guard, from the love our people bore him. It was a long struggle with death, but I succeeded. Floating Eagle grew stronger, and together we dreamed of escape; of escape for our unhappy people as well.

"And only for a traitor, whom we thought a friend, our plans would have succeeded. My son, when you strike for vengeance, do not forget him—the dog they have named *Garcia*!

"He betrayed us. And then Achiganaga was murdered. Not as a brave, but like a dog that has been caught stealing from its master. Bound to a post and whipped to death! *Garcia* held the whip. The dog murdered its master!"

"And the dog shall die a dog's death! I, Black Panther, swear it!" hoarsely muttered the half-blood, his clinched hand raised heavenward.

"It is well. But listen. I loved the chief. When they murdered him, they killed my heart. I lived on, but my mind was almost a blank. I only thought of *him*. I longed to die, but had not the spirit to deal the blow that would separate me from him in the spirit lands. And then another trial came to me.

"Nearly a year after Achiganaga died, my eyes were opened. Then one of the Spaniards began to whisper strange words in my ear. He told me that I was beautiful—that he loved me. I only laughed, at first. It seemed so strange that a man should say such things, now that he was dead. But then I became angry. Once he grasped me, and I struck him—my knife broke against the steel cloth he wore beneath his clothes. And then he made a great outcry, accusing me of trying to murder him, and the white braves came and chained my hands and threw me into a dark hole beneath the stone lodge.

"He came to see me, but I mocked at him, and bade him leave me to death, rather than the arms of my chief's murderer. He did go, for what must have been days, and days I saw nobody. I laughed, for I thought they meant to starve me to death, and then I could see Achiganaga once more.

"But then he came again, bringing rich food, and the dark, sweet drink that crazes—wine, they call it. I refused to eat or drink. Then he left.

"I sat there, the torch burning, its light showing the food and drink. I looked at them and laughed, for I thought I was strong. But I was not—I was weak. The cunning devil had calculated well. Nearly famished, I could not resist long—I ate and drank heartily."

Still Water paused and bowed her head, her form quivering like some storm-bound shrub. Black Panther crouched upon the skins, his burning eyes riveted upon the woman whom he called mother.

"The words choke me, but I must speak. Listen, my son. The Spaniard, true to his nature, was treacherous even in this. The food and the wine had been poisoned—not to kill the body, but with what hung a thick, black cloud over the mind. Only the traitor knew this. My people told me of it afterward. They believed I had forsworn my race—but they wronged me. As true as there is a Great Spirit above us, I did not know what I was doing.

"I lived on like one in a dream for two years. Then the Spaniard went back to his own land. There was no one to continue giving me the wicked medicine, and I began to wake up once more to real life. When I did, my son, *you* were then just beginning to walk and talk.

"I could not understand it, at first, but they soon told me the truth. I had been living as his wife through all that long sleep. A voice seemed to fill my ears, cursing me, cursing *you*—a voice that I knew was Achiganaga's. This and the terrible discovery crazed me, and I fled, no one knew whither.

"A party of friendly red-men found me and cared for me until the fever left my brain. Then I told my story. With them I lived, only occasionally visiting you by stealth. You know that it was not until a year since that I told you who I was, but I meant to have kept the rest secret, until you told me of your love for this—for *Lota Cavella*."

Black Panther arose to his feet and essayed to speak. A sickening dread was upon him, for he divined her answer. The words came from his lips in jerky syllables, harsh and constrained.

"Mother—tell me—his name?"

Still Water looked upon his agitated form with dimmed eyes, her face ghastly pale, as she answered him, slowly and frightfully distinct:

"His name—your father is the man you know as *Don Cavella*!"

Black Panther uttered a hoarse cry—almost groan—full of an intense anguish, and his stalwart figure quivered like a reed. But then with a stifled cry he sprang forward and clutched Still Water by the arm, glaring fixedly into her face.

Thus they stood, eye to eye, the woman calm and composed, her face evidencing the truth of her words. Black Panther could no longer doubt this, and with a hollow groan he staggered back and covered his face with his trembling hands.

"My son," and Mera-silla's voice sounded deep and commanding, "remember—you are a chief of the Tejuas. Look up—there is still one thing left you. Forget the past—think only of vengeance. Achiganaga calls for vengeance—I call for vengeance, and our people, who are yet slaves, call for freedom. *He* wrought all this—*Don Cavella*—and he must pay the forfeit."

Black Panther raised his head. His face bore deep traces of the fearful struggle. In that brief time he had aged years. Twice he strove to speak, but choked. Then with a powerful effort, the words came.

"Mother, tell me—who is *she*?"

"Your half-sister. He went back to his own land, but married one of another race. She came with him, after three or four years. They had two children. One of them looked like him

—Lota, they call her. The other was like her—pale, with yellow hair and eyes like the sky in summer. He loved her—almost worshiped her, I saw that, and my heart was hot with a yearning for revenge upon him.

"I struck his heart through her. One morning they found her dead by his side. I drove the knife to her heart, and she died almost in his arms. He slept on, for he breathed the sleeping weed that I held to his face. You were young then, but you must have remembered something of this?"

"I can remember."

"I did it. No one suspected me—all but a few friends believed I had died years before. My son, did I do right?"

"Wait—I can not think, now. My brain is dizzy. Lota—my God! *my sister!*" gasped Black Panther, as he staggered out into the open air, clutching at his throat as though choking.

Still Water sunk back upon the pallet of skins, weak and trembling, but with a strange glow in her eyes.

CHAPTER V.

A BOLD COUP.

BLACK PANTHER abruptly reined in his horse and sat motionless, gazing long and steadfastly before him, where uprose a gradually increasing cloud of dust, yet far in the distance. Upon that still day, there could be but one interpretation of this; a body of horsemen were approaching.

Five minutes later the Tejuas chieftain could distinguish the forms, color and equipage of the riders. A grim smile curled his lip as he recognized in the leader of the Spanish troopers, his late oppressor, Don Manuel.

"It's ill trusting a villain," muttered Black Panther, tightening the rein. "But they have made me out, I doubt not, and would call a retreat cowardice. I will meet them."

Like an arrow's flight the chieftain dashed toward the troop, checking his horse before them so abruptly that its jetty haunches fairly touched the ground. In haughty silence Black Panther returned the gaze of Don Manuel, until, worsted in the encounter, the Spaniard lowered his eyes and muttered a salutation.

"Why does Evil Eye ride so far from his people? This ground belongs to the Tejuas."

"They are our friends," replied Don Manuel, but his voice trembled with ill-suppressed ire, "and the treaty is not yet broken. Black Panther asked an answer to his terms. The white chief has sent it by me."

"Speak—what is it?"

"Not here. Black Panther spoke of allies; then there must be other chiefs. My message is to them as well. Let my brother lead on—we will follow."

Black Panther gazed keenly upon the Spaniard, but if Don Manuel had any covert motive in making this speech, his features did not show it.

The chief wheeled and spurred rapidly along his back trail, followed at a few yards' distance by the Spaniards.

Don Manuel rode sullenly along, his fiery eyes

riveted upon the magnificent figure before him, one hand idly toying with a pistol-butt. Only by the greatest exertion of his will could he resist the longing to draw the weapon and shoot his enemy down.

Slowly an evil, sneering smile grew upon his features, and the cruel eyes burned with a deeper glow. A slight gesture brought a soldier to his side. The man, short of stature, grizzled and weather-beaten, crafty and treacherous in feature, was wholly devoted to the service of his patron, to whom he was indebted for his present commission.

"Pedro," muttered Don Manuel, "I can trust you?"

"My life is yours, senor, if you call for it," was the quiet reply, in a tone undoubtedly sincere.

"Good! I will trust you. You know your mission—to refuse yonder varlet's terms, and to learn what we can of their force and disposition. War must follow, unless he, their head and front, is disposed of in time. You can count upon your men? They will obey you, no matter what the orders?"

"Yes. At my command they would charge the devil himself—all but one."

"You mean—"

"Corporal Baja. I believe he would become a traitor, with only half a chance," muttered the lieutenant, glancing over his shoulder and flushing quickly as he noted the proximity of the man he had thus denounced.

"You may be right—I believe you are. But hist—he will overhear us. Corporal Baja!"

Antone spurred forward and saluted.

"Ride ahead and ask the chief how much further it is to his village."

"Si, senor."

"You see, Pedro," added Don Manuel, as Antone obeyed orders, "I have a double purpose in making our visit, but if we can secure *him*, *alive*, that will do as well. With him as hostaeg for their peace, the red heathen will not dare molest us, knowing that their first blow would be the signal for their chieftain's death."

"But how— Ha! look yonder!" exclaimed the lieutenant.

Black Panther shook his rein free, and with a wild snort his mettlesome steed bounded over the prairie. Don Manuel grated forth a curse and half-drew a pistol, but the Indian was already beyond range.

"Corporal Baja!"

Antone checked his horse.

"What does this mean? Where has the chief gone? What did you tell him?" angrily demanded the Spaniard.

"I but delivered your message, Don Manuel. Beyond that line of hills yonder lies the village. He said he would ride on to prepare for your reception," was the quiet reply.

The Spaniard stifled a bitter curse, and Antone fell to the rear. Fortunately for the worthy corporal, his chief did not notice the derisive smile that curled the huge mustache, else it might have fared hard with the doughty veteran.

In fact, Antone had overheard the plot, and had warned Black Panther of his peril.

Half an hour later the Spaniards were met by

a party of leading chiefs, and ceremoniously escorted into the Tejuas village.

The proceedings of the council that was speedily in session, need not be detailed. A few words will explain all that is essential to an understanding of our story.

In a brief speech, interpreted by a petty chief selected by himself, Don Manuel stated that his people rejected the proffered terms, preferring war to releasing their slaves. Thus, at the end of the time proposed by Black Panther, it would be either peace or war, just as the red-men elected. It was for them to choose.

Black Panther replied. He accepted the decision. For two days peace; after that, war. For that length of time the Spanish deputies were safe and could remain as guests if they chose, being assured kindly and courteous treatment. A chieftain pledged his word; they might trust in it.

Consulting with his satellite, Pedro, Don Manuel resolved to accept of the proffered hospitality, as both men and horses needed food and rest. Though hating Black Panther with all his heart, he knew that he could depend upon the chieftain's assurances of safety. Thus, mingling as though the best of friends, the village once more assumed its wonted appearance.

Mention has been made of a petty chief—one Sleeping Crow. He was old, and in former times had stood only second in rank to Achiganaga, but while a slave he had become a drunkard, and now, when once more a free man, had fallen from his high estate on that account, being worthless and unreliable when under the influence of liquor.

In selecting his chieftains, Black Panther had passed Sleeping Crow by, and only in consideration of his past services and rank, gave him a petty office, merely nominal. Naturally proud and bigoted, Sleeping Crow became disgusted, ripe for treachery.

This fact Don Manuel quickly ascertained, and hence chose him as the instrument for carrying out his plans. True to his nature he plotted treachery, even while being indebted to his foe for food and drink.

Whether by chance or design, the Spaniard and his tool, Pedro, were both quartered in the lodge of Sleeping Crow. While eating, Don Manuel weighed his man, and a grim smile curled on his thin lips.

In obedience to a gesture, Pedro produced a capacious flask of brandy, at the sight of which Sleeping Crow's eyes opened widely, and his mouth watered, unconsciously. The strong liquor was vastly different from the herb-drink that had been his substitute, and beneath its genial influence the Indian thawed out and became very communicative.

By adroit questioning, Don Manuel drew from him all that he desired, though the chief seemed inclined to prose over his own wrongs. Only the fear of being treated as a runaway slave prevented him from returning to the Spaniards, for while Black Panther and his mother were in power, as now, he stood scant chance of preferment.

Don Manuel and Pedro exchanged rapid glances. Half intoxicated, Sleeping Crow did not notice this.

The Spaniard quickly secured the brandy flask, considering that Sleeping Crow had already drunk enough of the liquid poison to answer his purpose. Then, cautiously, he developed his secret plans.

He questioned Sleeping Crow closely about Black Panther and his mother; upon what terms they stood, and like points. The answers he received seemed highly satisfactory.

Then he promised the drunkard safety and honors in case he returned to his allegiance, offering him a commission, and that when the Tejuas were once more subdued, he should be declared chief. In return for all this he asked but one thing.

Sleeping Crow was very curious, but not until he had solemnly pledged himself to secrecy in event of refusal, would Don Manuel gratify him. Then the words were spoken, and after a brief deliberation, accepted.

Shortly before sunset Don Manuel announced his intention of setting forth upon his return journey, preferring the night to traveling through the hot sunlight. Black Panther watched them as they rode away, a cold smile on his face.

At this moment Sleeping Crow glided up to the village like one in great haste, and handed the chief a small slip of bark upon which were rudely depicted sundry signs and symbols. Black Panther quickly interpreted these, and seemed greatly surprised.

"Where got you this?" he demanded, sternly, his eyes keenly scanning the drunkard's face.

"From Bird's Foot. He bade me hand it to you at once; that his chief was in great haste. Then he hastened back to tell Cloven Hill, that Black Panther was coming."

Apparently satisfied, his suspicions lulled, the chief turned away. Two minutes later he was mounted and speeding from the village, while Sleeping Crow laughed triumphantly. Thus far he had succeeded.

Again he left the village, and 'twas not until after dark that he returned. Seeking Still Water's lodge, he was admitted on giving his name. Haughtily Mera-silla awaited his words, scornful contempt impressed upon every feature. Sleeping Crow frowned, but with an effort stifled the hot words that burned his throat.

"What does Sleeping Crow seek here?"

"He comes from Black Panther. He brings word from the great chief to his mother."

"Sleeping Crow talks strange words," slowly uttered Still Water, her suspicions evidently awakened. "Why should Black Panther send a message? It is but an hour since he was here."

"It is not for Sleeping Crow to question the actions of his chief. He takes orders and obeys. He will return and say that Still Water does not care to come," quietly retorted the savage, playing his part admirably.

"Stay—I have not refused. But where is the chief?"

"At the place where three hills form a circle round a deep basin. Black Panther is there with Cloven Hill, chief of the Mohave nation. They have great tidings from the Southwest, and wish Still Water to advise with them."

"I know the spot—I will go."

"Good. Black Panther said to make haste. If Still Water does not know the trail, Sleeping Crow can guide her."

"There is no need. I know it well. You can stay here," coldly returned the woman, who felt a deep aversion for the drunkard.

Mera-silla left the village on foot, for the three hills mentioned by the traitor as the rendezvous were scarcely more than a mile distant. Close behind her, though she knew it not, glided a shadowy figure; that of Sleeping Crow, whose brain was already filled with thoughts of revenge and gratified ambition.

Still Water gained the hill foot, and pausing, gave utterance to a peculiar cry; a signal that had often called Black Panther forth from the Spanish colony, in days gone by. Bending her head, she listened intently for the expected answer.

Though it came not, a cry broke from her lips and she quickly turned; the echo of a stealthy footfall had met her ear. Then two strong arms were flung around her form, and despite her desperate struggles, she was borne heavily to the ground.

"Traitor—dog!" she hissed angrily, as the moon shone out clearly and revealed the features of Sleeping Crow, now doubly repulsive with the fiendish triumph written thereon. "What does this mean?"

"It means that you are our captive, slave," uttered a harsh voice near at hand. "You are in my power now. I will hold you as security for your son's peace. It was for this that I came here. The Tejuas are blind fools—a child could throw dust in their eyes," exultantly cried Don Manuel, as by his orders the woman was securely bound.

"Truly the Spaniard are brave! Twenty soldiers to one weak squaw! and she bound. Strike! kill me—and then go to your people and boast of your warlike deeds," sneeringly cried Still Water, her eyes flashing hotly.

"Not so. We have better use for you than that, as I told you before. You go with us to the colony. There are those there who will be glad to see you again—especially Don Cavella."

Mera-silla gave a start, but did not speak. Don Manuel laughed aloud, and then turned to where stood Sleeping Crow. Pedro fell back a pace.

"Chief," slowly uttered the Spaniard, "you have done well. The great white chief need no longer doubt your being a true friend. He will reward you richly. You shall stand high and look down upon those who so lately laughed at you."

"It is good. Sleeping Crow is very glad; he will take Black Panther's scalp when they meet in battle," and the voice of the traitor trembled with delight.

"I have said it—Sleeping Crow shall have his reward—and now!"

Don Manuel uttered the last words in a clear, sharp tone, and thus gave the signal for which Pedro was waiting. Unseen in the darkness, the latter had gained a position close behind the savage, and drawing his sword, at the signal gave one adroit thrust, literally spitting Sleeping Crow upon the weapon.

With a hollow groan, the rewarded traitor

sunk to the ground, dead. Don Manuel laughed gleefully, and Still Water uttered a cry of pleasure, as she saw how promptly she had been avenged.

Then the troop set forward, riding fast and steadily, for they knew that their treachery could not long remain undiscovered, when their trail would be swiftly followed by the outraged Indians.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEATH DOOM.

THE rage of Black Panther was frightful when he discovered the cheat that had been put upon him—that Cloven Hill had sent him no message, and his ride there and back, of full forty miles, was nothing but a wild-goose chase. Many and bitter were the curses he poured out against the jesting Sleeping Crow; but then his countenance suddenly changed.

Plunging his spurs rowel deep into the sides of his animal, he sped on in silence, a dark foreboding at his heart.

Too soon were his fears realized. Day was just dawning when the village was reached. Still Water had been missed shortly before, and the double trail being found, was traced up to where it ended in a mass of fleshless bones, over which the cowardly coyotes were still wrangling.

Sick at heart, Black Panther sunk to the ground, until a glad cry roused him. The bones were those of a man—of Sleeping Crow, and Still Water had plainly been carried into captivity. Better that than death, for now there was some hope—though faint, indeed.

No need to ask who were the abductors. Black Panther sprung erect and swore the death-hunt against Don Manuel, who had plotted this vile blow, even while partaking of their hospitality. And then the son set to work in deadly earnest.

A few brief, decisive orders, and a score of braves darted away to prepare for the chase. Then Black Panther spoke long and earnestly to Crooked Hoof, his chief lieutenant. Half an hour later he was seated in the saddle and dashing along at break-neck speed, followed by his picked braves, each one leading a spare horse.

With frequent changes they rode on until late afternoon without a halt. Then a single figure appeared before them on foot and in a sorry plight. The bronze hide proclaimed the Indian, who, when recognizing Black Panther, sunk upon his knees with sobs of delight.

The blood slowly trickled from his back, where deep ridges told of the cruel lash; from his head, where the traitor Garcia's knife had been at work—oozing from the unsightly ear-stumps.

His story was quickly told. Don Manuel had returned bringing with him the Indian queen, a prisoner. Then he—the slave—had been chosen to bear a message to Black Panther.

The message, in substance, was this:

If Black Panther attempted a rescue, or should he attack the colony or any of its people, Still Water should meet with a death of frightful torture. So long as he restrained his people, she was safe, and would only suffer a temporary captivity.

Black Panther listened to this message in silence, his face still unmoved, only with a deadly glitter in his full eye that told how deeply his heart was stirred. Anxiously the warriors awaited his decision; it came soon.

"Little Claw," he said, to a trusted brave, "you will await me here. Dismount and rest in the *motte* yonder. Stay until I come. You understand?"

"Little Claw hears, but he would rather go with his chief. Two arms are stronger than one," quickly replied the savage.

"It is better no. Stay here until I come."

Black Panther dismounted and glided along upon foot, his mind busy with the details of a plan that had already found shape in his brain. Ere he came within sight of the colony's buildings—in little more than an hour's time, while the sun was still above the horizon—all was arranged.

It was deep dusk ere Black Panther left his covert among the hills and glided toward the fort. His war-paint and plumes had vanished—now he looked more like one of the slaves at the mines: dirty, miserable and mud-stained.

Corporal Antone Baja was singing a camp-song in a voice more remarkable for its depth and volume than sweetness, when this figure paused by his side, and thrust a slip of paper between his fingers. It was not this alone that caused the corporal to give such a start, and his bronzed cheek to so suddenly blanch; a name had been breathed into his ear—that of Black Panther. And more—in the speaker he recognized the Tejuas chieftain.

His comrades had not overlooked this start and sudden confusion, as the billet was thrust into his hand, and their keen eyes detected the note. Antone's affair with Dolores was well known, and now the jest ran merrily around, at the expense of the doughty corporal, who made no attempt to undeceive them.

A quick glance showed him the figure of the spy gliding away outside the shadow, and arising, with a muttered apology, he followed. Though free with their jests, none of the soldiers cared about following their comrade; he wielded a terribly hard and heavy fist as they well knew—some to their sorrow.

"Horns of the devil! Don Pablo, but are you mad, that you venture here? Is life such a burden that you—"

"Peace, good Antone," interrupted Black Panther's deep voice. "I am here—you know why I come—that is enough. But why did you not cry out and proclaim my presence—why not raise the hue-and-cry, and hunt me down?"

"Pablo!"

"You were with those who stole away my mother, after swearing to keep peace for two days—the words were still warm on your lips. You ate and drank with us—then paid the debt in that manner. Is it a wonder, then, that I ask you that question?" bitterly added the Tejuas chieftain.

"True, I was with them, but what could I do? I was but one—a simple guide—and they were twenty. I knew nothing of the foul plot until your mother, as you say, was captured, else I would have done my best to prevent it, for your

sake. He—Don Manuel—already distrusts me; had I made one sign of discontent, he would have slain me even as he did the traitor who sold your mother. I am your friend, Pablo. You should know that by now. You wrong me by your suspicions."

"Pardon me, good Antone. I was wrong—I can see that now. But you can not blame me, for she is all that I have left to love and care for now—save my poor people. I will trust you—I do trust you, for my life is in your hands."

"I will not betray you, Pablo, though the reward was ten times as large. But what are you here for?"

"To free my mother—or else perish with her," was the firm reply.

"I will be the last, then, I fear," gloomily added Antone.

"Tell me—where is she kept?"

"In the same cell from which I freed you. She isn't bound, but a sentinel stands at the door. He is none of my men, or I would risk all and set her free. Don Manuel chose him—a dirty scoundrel who hates me like poison."

"Only one? Then he must die! I will free her, though I wade to my chin in blood!" uttered Black Panther, in a low, deadly tone.

"You must wait—'tis too early yet. Don Manuel or some other will be visiting the cell, it is likely. Wait for a couple of hours or so, then you can work better. And now—I am going to see Dolores. Is there any thing I can tell her for you?" cunningly added the grizzled lover.

Black Panther smiled sadly.

"Yes. Bid her ask Senorita Lota to meet me at the garden gate. I have much to tell her, and this may be my only chance. You will?"

"Yes—come with me."

Black Panther had not long to wait at the gate, and then as the wicket opened, Lota was resting upon his breast, her arms around his neck, her lips uplifted to his. But vastly different were the sensations of the young chief now, from what they had been when last they met.

Then they had renewed their vows, had promised forever to be true; though their past might be dark and tangled, the light of each other's love should be strong enough to guide them in safety to the end. But now—Black Panther could not suppress a bitter groan of heartfelt agony.

"Pablo—you are ill!"

"No, I am well in body, but my mind is sick. Lota, my heart's jewel, pity me! There is a fearful trial before us—yes, you, too, for I believe you love me?"

"Better than my life, Pablo—I sometimes fear I love you too devotedly—it is more like idolatry," murmured the maiden, in a faltering voice.

"Tell me—if I had been your brother, would you have loved me?"

"I would have loved you, Pablo, but not—not like I do now," and Lota suddenly paused with a vague terror. "Tell me, Pablo, what do you mean? Your words and looks are so strange to-night!"

"My poor Lota, listen. There is a sad story that I must tell you. I only heard it a few days since. Do not interrupt me, for the truth is hard enough now," and then, without mention-

ing names, he rapidly related the story narrated him by Still Water.

Lota listened as if spell-bound, and when Black Panther spoke of the half-blood loving the child of his own father, she felt his heart throb wildly as her light form rested against his bosom, then the vague shadow of fear began to assume shape and substance.

"Pablo, what do you mean? Surely these are not—you do not mean—"

"My poor darling, I do. It kills me to say the words, but I am that man—Don Cavella is my father as well as yours!"

The stricken maiden did not speak, but a low, gasping moan broke from her lips, and Black Panther felt her form grow limp and moveless in his arms. A quick glance told him she had swooned.

For a moment he stood in doubt, but then catching her up in his strong arms, he glided along to the bank of the *arroyo*, where the cold water speedily restored her to consciousness. The awaking was terrible, and Lota even prayed for death.

It was late—nearly midnight—when the young couple returned to the garden gate, where they found Antone and Dolores. A simple hand-pressure and brother and sister parted.

"Now, Antone, to business. I only ask that you go on in advance, to see if the passage is clear of all but the guard. Then you must return to the quarters, so that, if questioned, you will not be suspected."

"That will be best. Wait here," and the corporal glided along the passage. "It is clear," he added, speedily returning. "Only one guard and he's half asleep. Don't tell me what you intend doing, because it goes sorely against the grain for me to lie, and I may be asked bothersome questions to-morrow, Don Manuel dislikes me so. You remember the way we came? It's the only one by which you can gain the prairie without being seen or heard."

"I remember. Good-by, now, for we may never meet again, unless it is in battle. If we do, remember that your life is safe from my hand."

The two clasped hands and then Black Panther glided along the passage, making no more noise than would a shadow. Dimly shining before him he could see the rude lantern of the drowsy sentinel, whose muffled figure he could trace leaning against an angle in the masonry.

A quick glance showed Black Panther that he could hope for success only through bloodshed. The man must be approached from almost directly in front, and the sound of a struggle there could scarcely escape the ears of those on duty without the passage.

A stern smile settled on his features as he drew a long, keen-pointed knife from beneath his scanty garments. Crouching low down, until almost flat with the floor, he glided stealthily along, clutching the thirsty knife, his eyes aglow with passion as he beheld before him one of the hated race that had so cruelly oppressed him and his.

The drowsy sentinel nods violently, then starts erect and opens his eyes widely, glancing quickly around with a startled look. But the chieftain has flattened prone upon the floor, and the shad-

ows cast by the flickering lantern, blending with his dark figure, prevents the soldier from discovering the impending peril.

Yawning heavily, rubbing an eye with one hand, the sentry grumbles discontentedly, and then once more settles back to rest. And then the shadow of death slowly moves forward; inch by inch, foot by foot, still more, until the light shines full upon its head.

Cautiously the half-blood gathers himself up, and then with a leap like that of the venomous animal whose name he has adopted, he springs forward, one hand clutching the throat of the bewildered soldier, while the other uplifts the glittering knife.

One instant thus; then a lightning-like flash, a peculiar, gritting *thud*, and the keen steel is buried from sight in the unfortunate man's breast. A gasping gurgle—a convulsive shudder—that is all; the soldier is dead.

Right well Black Panther knew the fastenings of that door. There were no locks and keys; massive bars on the outside were the only fastening, but the cell had been fashioned for keeping captives in, not out.

Quickly withdrawing the crimsoned knife, Black Panther laid the corpse in one corner, and taking up the lantern, removed the bars. Opening the door he entered. The rustle of woman's garments as though the captive was shrinking back met his ear, but then came a low, glad cry as the light reflected upon his features.

"Pablo, my son! thank God!"

"My mother—you did not think I would desert you?" murmured Black Panther, as Still Water clung about his neck.

"No, I knew your true heart too well, but I did not expect you so soon! I looked for you at the head of our people—but I have not heard any fighting."

"No, I could not wait for that. It will take time to subdue this place, and even then I might not have found you. Those who would so wantonly outrage hospitality, would scarcely hesitate at murder. But you are well—the dogs have not harmed you?"

"No—I am well and strong, now that I have you. But, Pablo—have you—seen her?"

"Yes, I told her all that you told me," was the gloomy response.

"And how does she bear it?"

"I fear that it will kill her—as it would have done me, only for the great work that is before me. My people first, then—"

"Come, let us go. There is danger in lingering here. Should you be discovered—"

"Ha! ha! trapped—trapped! You are mine at last, cursed dog of a slave!" yelled an exultant voice from without the cell, as the heavy door jarred to, and then the quick rattle of bars told that an enemy had surprised them.

With a howl of fury Black Panther sprung forward and clutched at the door, but in vain. It fitted closely, opening inward, and already was securely barred.

"Yell on, you half-blood cur!" screamed the voice, and now Black Panther recognized it as that of Don Manuel. "You are safely caged now, and though you escaped once, I will take good care that you don't do so again."

Black Panther realized how useless were his efforts, and so desisted, falling back with a muffled snarl, one hand seeking the gore-stained knife at his waist. Though entrapped, he was yet dangerous, as those would find who attempted to enter.

Chuckling vindictively, Don Manuel turned away to make known his important capture. He had been about to visit Still Water, hoping to extort some useful information from her, when he was surprised to see the glimmer of a light inside the cell, showing through a narrow slit that told him the door was ajar.

Scenting mischief he had crept up and stealthily peered through the crevice. Recognizing Black Panther he had closed and barred the door, as stated. So elated was he at this lucky coup, that he did not give a second thought to the murdered sentry.

Great was the excitement and rejoicings of the council at these tidings. Don Manuel, more than ever, was a hero in their eyes.

"You say he is in the cell, yet armed and unbound?"

"Yes, Colonel Perez."

"That will not do. He must be disarmed. He is a desperate fellow, and may work us great injury unless he is closely confined. You will please see to it, brother."

"Very well," and as he spoke, a fiery glitter filled Manuel's eyes, that was not overlooked by the commandante.

"Stay," he added, quietly. "I will go with you. I may wish to ask him some questions."

Don Manuel bit his lip and frowned, but dare not make any demur. The two, followed by a file of soldiers, proceeded to the cell.

"Hallo, within there—dog, slave!" cried Don Manuel; but there came no reply.

"Black Panther?" added the commandante, in a more manly tone.

"Who calls Black Panther?" haughtily responded the chief, in full, deep tones.

"I—the commandante. You are our prisoner. You entered this place as a spy, and being discovered with bloody hands, you are treated like an enemy, though the treaty has not yet expired."

"Who first broke it? Ask the white-livered craven at your side. With the vow of peace still warm upon his lips he stole away my mother. You, Colonel Perez, in most things, I ever considered a man of honor, but if you uphold and justify him in this, I curse you even as I curse him."

"This is vain, Black Panther. All is fair in war. But listen. I promise you good treatment, though a prisoner, of course, if you quietly submit and surrender your weapons to me."

"They are here at your service—why don't you come and take them?" sneered Black Panther.

"We will, if you refuse. But it may be fatal to you, our doing so."

"Let it be so, then. But before that I will have revenge. Your entire force could not conquer me before I would have soiled my knife with the black blood of a traitor cur."

Don Manuel changed color slightly at this blunt speech, for he could not doubt the meaning of Black Panther. Then he and Colonel Perez

conversed together for a moment, earnestly. The latter spoke:

"I give you one more chance, Black Panther. If you surrender quietly, all is well. If not—listen. I have ten trusty soldiers here, armed with loaded carbines. They have their orders and will obey them. In just five minutes I fling open the door. If you resist, they will fire. Not at *you*—we have other needs than that—but at *your mother*! Now choose."

"Don't heed them, my son," muttered Still Water. "It would be giving up your life. Perhaps you can cut your way through them—if no, it can be no worse than to surrender. If they once get you helpless, your fate is sealed—so die in arms, as a chieftain of the Tejuas should!"

"No, mother, I will not," and Black Panther spoke decisively. "I will not have *your* blood upon my head. I will submit now—but never fear. I have a trusty friend who will contrive some way to free me."

"Time is up," cried Colonel Perez. "Your answer, Black Panther?"

"I submit. You can enter without fear," sneered the half-blood, standing with folded arms before his mother.

The door opened and the soldiers entered first with leveled carbines. Then Black Panther was deprived of his knife, and bound hand and foot, as was also his mother.

"This is only temporarily, you see. To-morrow you shall have separate cells and be unbound. You both are too cunning and fertile of expedients to be left together if at liberty."

The captives did not reply, and then the Spaniards left the cell. Late though it was, the council was convened, and the important capture thoroughly discussed. Scouts were dispatched to learn if the chief had been accompanied by any force, and preparations were made to resist any attack in case the Indians should attempt such when they learned of the capture of their revered chief.

Don Cavella slowly proceeded toward the prison cell, an expression of care upon his features. He bore the final decision of the council, and only consented to be the messenger in hopes that he might be able to induce the captives to accept the ultimatum, knowing full well in what relation they stood to him.

By his orders the new guard stood at the head of the passage beyond ear-shot, not caring to make him a sharer in the secrets that might be divulged during the interview. Then he entered and stood before the two beings whom he had given such bitter cause to curse his very name.

Still Water was the first to speak, and her voice sounded strangely harsh and unnatural in that close room.

"Ha! ha! father—mother and son! Truly a family reunion!"

"Then you—he knows all?"

"Yes, Don Cavella, I know all, and fortunate for you it is that I did not learn of this before. *You* would not be here now," coldly interrupted Black Panther.

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing; only that I would have killed you. I have sworn to do it now—I will keep my word."

"You are not wise, boy, to tell me this, when your life lies in my power. I have only to say the word and you die—not I," proudly replied Don Cavella.

"Not so—'tis you that are the fool, not I. I do not do my work by halves. You kill me—very well. Others carry on the vow. A dozen true chiefs, unknown to you, have sworn the oath with me. When one dies or is killed, the next takes his place. Can you order them all to death? Hardly. So I say you are doomed. You understand me now—I see you tremble!" quickly rejoined Black Panther.

"Why do you hate me so?"

"You ask that? Look! there is my mother. That is my reason. Is it not enough?"

"Bah! I am foolish for giving ear to your idle ravings. I come upon very different business. The council has met in secret session and have sent me to bear you their decision."

"Go on—I am listening."

"Your life or death—and that of your mother as well—rests with you. Which do you elect? Life and freedom, or death by torture?"

"Proceed. Tell me the conditions, first. Then I will answer you."

"Very well. Listen closely. You may go from here, free and unharmed, with your mother, if you swear solemnly never to molest us hereafter. In one year from now we will set free all your people whom we now hold in slavery. Will you do this?"

"And if I refuse?"

"Then what I told you—death by torture for you both!"

"We refuse, accursed Spaniard—we refuse, once for all!" cried Still Water, vehemently.

"My son, accept no favors through his hands—die if must be, like the successor of Achiganaga."

"Peace, mother," quietly replied Black Panther. "I know my duty. Don Cavella, I reject your proposition. Even were I craven enough to accept it, my people would not. They would cast me out and degrade even my name. It is war—bitter, exterminating, so long as a Spanish interloper remains upon the grounds of our fathers. You hear me—I refuse. Do your worst."

"You speak boldly now, but how long will it last? Until you come to the torturers. Then you will beg for your life—when it is too late. But think again."

"No, I have thought. I only speak once. You have my answer."

"Very well, I will give it to the council. I would have saved you, but you seem bent on self-destruction. So be it then. I wash my hands of the matter," hotly cried Don Cavella. "Improve your time as best you may—to-morrow you die!"

The iron-studded door clanged heavily shut, and the two captives were left to their own thoughts.

CHAPTER VII.

ANTONE'S FRIENDSHIP.

"FOOL of the devil! I give it up—I wash my hands of the whole affair. I'll have no more of that! When a man is so determined to visit Sa-

tan at the double-quick, the best care is to give him free path. No more for me—Don Pablo, your health!"

Corporal Antone Baja was not exactly himself, as several circumstances proved. One—he did not respond to his own toast: the half-raised flask of liquor was lowered ere it touched his parted lips, and the corporal sat gazing at vacancy while the generous wine gurgled from the overturned bottle.

"Does the fellow think I have naught to do but to set him free from the traps he continually thrusts his head into? Twice—this makes the third time; and last, I guess, from what is said. Senorita Lota—Dolores tells me—nearly distracted; *wouldn't* I please help him get free? I—Corporal Antone Baja—set him free! 'Tis easy to say yes—but, how? That's where the saddle galls!"

In good sooth the complaisant Corporal Baja had gotten himself into a quandary. When the news that Black Panther had been captured, spread through the colony, it quickly reached the ears of Lota Cavella, and added to the strange discovery of the night, well-nigh crazed her. Dolores was her only confederate, as yet, and she having implicit faith in Antone, naturally proposed a consultation with that worthy.

This interview resulted in Antone's pledging himself to free Don Pablo, and at the time he fully believed it could be done. But now, looking at the task in cold blood, the affair assumed quite a different aspect.

"'Twould be easy to repeat his act of last night, but that I will not do. Though a scurvy set of rascals in one sense, Don Manuel's bodyguard are my comrades. If it was only—"

Slowly a light seemed to overspread the corporal's features, and his eyes began to glisten with satisfaction.

"'Tis no more than fair—she got me into the trap, then she must help me out. 'Tis Black Jose's watch; that makes the matter all the easier. I'll—"

Glancing quickly around him Antone left the building and sauntered leisurely toward the Mission-house, beneath which Black Panther and Mera-silla were still confined. A sharp challenge brought him to a pause at the head of the passage.

"'Tis a friend, Black Jose," uttered Antone, advancing. "Though I hoped not to have found you here."

"Why so?" crustily replied the sentinel, for there was little love lost between the two, for a very fair reason: none other than Dolores herself.

"Because, I counted on your company this evening to help pass an hour or so with wine and cards. But you will be off in time to join us?"

"No, my hours are till midnight," and the soldier frowned disgustedly, even as his thick, sensual lips unconsciously smacked at thought of the treat thus denied him.

"Crooked luck—but better fortune next time. We will think of you, Jose, while enjoying ourselves."

"Cursed dog! to tantalize a poor devil in that manner! He knew my hours—'tis only some of his spite. But I'll be even with him yet—I, Black Jose, swear it!" muttered the ill-favored

soldier, as Corporal Baja turned and strode leisurely away.

The dreary monotony of Black Jose's watch was broken some two hours before midnight by the sound of a cautious footfall, and warned by the fate of his predecessor, he crouched low down in the dense shadow, with weapons ready for instant use. His fears, however, were quickly dispelled.

A voice came softly echoing along the passage, causing his ears to prick with astonishment, and the blood to tingle in his veins. The voice of a woman—and that woman one for the possession of whom he would have given his very soul.

"Who calls!"

"I—is that you, Senor Jose?"

"Yes—and you are—"

"Dolores—you remember?"

"Do I not?" a little bitterly. "She once taught me to believe that she loved me, and me alone, but then—pouf! another comes along, and off dances Dolores. You see my memory is good!"

"True, Jose," and Dolores drew nearer until her trim figure was within the full glare of the lantern. "But can you not forget? 'Tis easy if you will it so. Forget all but that which you would rather remember of the past year. Do you understand me?"

"No—not exactly. You mean—"

"Pish! how stupid you great big men are! All must be spoken in just so many words. You have no perception—actions go for nothing. You would force a woman to say in open words that she loves you—"

"Dolores!"

"Jose—you see? You obliged me—I could not help it!" murmured Dolores, as her lithe form yielded to the passionate embrace of the sentinel.

"But Baja—?"

"Blind—very blind, my Jose. You could not see? Must I tell? I saw you with Catalina—then I turned to the corporal, just to—well, to make you jealous."

"But you told me—"

"Because you made me angry—that is all, Jose. Shall it be now as before? Say yes or no, because—"

Black Jose replied in actions far more expressive than words could have been. Half smothered by his kisses, Dolores managed to slip from his embrace, and then something familiar touched his hand.

"What—Dolores?"

"Yes, Jose. Take it. I thought of you, here in the damp, alone and uncomfortable, while your comrades, not one-half your worth, are enjoying themselves over their wine and cards, so I ventured to steal hither and bring you this. Drink hearty—'twill counteract the chill."

"But"—and Black Jose eyed the flask wistfully—"my orders are strict. If discovered, I would be flogged—perhaps worse."

"And who will be the wiser? You drink just enough to keep the chill away—then I take the flask with me when I go," reproachfully added Dolores.

The deluded sentinel cast aside his scruples, and paid his respects to the bottle. And what with the liquor and the presence of Dolores, he

soon lost all doubts, entirely forgetting the duty upon which he had been placed.

Dolores now felt that her chief difficulty lay in keeping the infatuated soldier within proper bounds, and had it not been that the strong liquor was already obfuscating the brain of Black Jose, he would have seen that she was playing a part, from the sudden change.

"My angel!" hiccupped the drunkard. "You mean it? When will it be?"

"Yes, of course I mean it; but what do you mean?" laughed Dolores.

"The—the wedding—when shall we call on the padre for his blessing?"

"When you please, Jose. But now I must go, though I hate it. It is so dark outside, and I might meet with some of those drunken soldiers, whose evil minds can not conceive a fair reason for a woman's being out after nightfall. Were you not on duty, I would—"

"What? Speak out, my jewel. Fear not. I would refuse you nothing now, even though you were to ask me to walk bare-footed through Prickly Pear Desert!"

"I meant I wished you could go with me as far as the gate of the garden, but—"

"No more; I will go—come!"

"But you are on duty?"

"Curse the—the duty! Come, I say—come! But wait—the bottle. That must go, too. 'Twould tell awkward tales if it were found here in the morning."

Supporting, rather than supported by the drunken dupe, Dolores left the passage, and slowly strolled toward the mansion of Don Cavella.

Though so short a distance, the walk occupied a good half hour, and would not have terminated then only for a somewhat singular incident. A dark figure silently glided up behind Black Jose and dealt him a heavy blow upon the head, that felled him to the ground, half-stunned and wholly bewildered.

Though the shock partially sobered him, when Jose arose, there was nothing to be seen. Dolores had vanished, and only for the thumping in his brain he would have believed it all a dream. Soberly puzzled, he was quickly recalled to a sense of his neglect of duty, by hearing the call for the relief guard to turn out. Knowing well what discovery meant, he hastened back to his post, just in time to escape observation.

But, as is natural with drunken men when they try to appear especially sober, Black Jose overdid the matter, and the officer of the guard, a veteran soldier, quickly discovered his condition. Despite his protests, Jose was arrested, and at once conveyed before the commandante.

Fully realizing the importance of his captive's safety, Colonel Perez suspected mischief, and ordering Black Jose under arrest, went in person to inspect the cell. It was empty. On the floor still lay the thongs that had held the prisoners, severed by a keen blade—plain evidence of treachery.

The alarm was instantly given, and soldiers dispatched in quest of the fugitives, but one by one the different parties returned empty-handed, until only one squad remained out. An hour

after day, a single rider returned, having startling tidings.

His comrades had been slain by the Indians, and he alone had escaped as by a miracle. He also declared that the ambushed savages had been led by Black Panther in person, close beside whom rode a woman that he recognized as their late captive.

Meantime, Black Jose was called upon to pay a dear price for his credulity of the preceding night. On being questioned, he gave a plain account of the events that had occurred, love of life proving far stronger than his vows to Dolores, now that he knew she must have been playing a cunning part deliberately deceiving him.

But fate was against him. The plot had been too cunningly formed and thoroughly matured for his word to break it down, truth though he told. Falsehood appeared truth, and truth falsehood.

Dolores affirmed her innocence, and cited Corporal Baja as proof. Antone declared that he had spent the evening in her company, not once losing sight of her until the alarm spread that the prisoners had escaped. Senorita Lota Cavella testified that Corporal Baja had visited Dolores, with her approval, that night, shortly after dark, and that he was still in the house when the alarm was given.

Others recalled the threats of Black Jose against his successful rival, and then the council-chamber was closed. Ten minutes later, a volley of musketry told all that the supposed traitor had met his fate.

Antone felt a little compunction at this unexpected termination of his plot, but philosophically consoled himself with the reflection that death was better for a soldier than flogging, anyhow."

In one portion of his evidence he had lied most barefacedly; he had lost sight of Dolores while she was walking with Black Jose, for that was the time he spent in freeing the captives from their bonds and sending them beyond the lines.

CHAPTER VIII.

HAND TO HAND!

Two days later, one of the men captured with Antone, came in bearing a frightful story. This man was Pepe the *rastreador*, or traller.

Black Panther had returned, fearfully enraged, and convened a council at once. Pepe overheard his guards conversing about the proceedings, and thus gained an idea of what had transpired, as well as the future plans of the chieftain.

First, the six captives were to be offered up as a sacrifice, then the braves were to march upon the colony. Owing to his knowledge of their language, Pepe was kept separate from his comrades, lest he should work mischief by telling them what he might overhear.

Nerved to desperation by the fate before him, Pepe worked his hands free, and then calling the guard to his side, clutched him by the throat, actually choking him to death without alarming those outside. It was already dark without, and knowing that his deed could not long remain undiscovered, he donned the

robe of the Indian and glided out into the night. Scarcely had he left the confines of the village ere the alarm was given, and then he fled for the hills, knowing that only by hiding could he hope to escape.

Though the chase was close and persistent, he was not discovered, and then from his cave upon the hillside, he beheld the unfortunate captives burned at the stake, amid the most diabolical tortures. Taking advantage of the Indians' evident preoccupation, Pepe fled at full speed, gaining the colony in safety.

Among other bits of information, he stated the time set by Black Panther for an attack upon the colony. Though fully confident that they could easily repulse this, the Spaniards were far from at ease, for while thus occupied the mine-work must be abandoned, and did the water gain full possession, their hopes in that direction were at an end.

Hot-blooded and impatient, Don Manuel proposed dealing a counter blow, and sketched such a plausible plan that the council gave their assent to its being put into execution.

So, silently, one by one, not knowing whither they were destined, a strong force of soldiery filed from the fort, gathering beyond the *arroyo* where they received their instructions.

Widely separating they galloped on for many a mile before again coming together, when they proceeded more deliberately, under guidance of Pepe, the traller. All these precautions had been taken to deceive Black Panther in case he should cross their trail, while bound for the colony. It was not their purpose to meet the chief face to face. That, with their comparatively weak force, would be madness, ending in certain destruction.

All this had consumed time, and it was night again before the Spaniard reached the village of the Tejuas. Then, in a sheltered nook amid the hills, they halted, and Pepe was sent forward to reconnoiter.

Shortly after midnight he returned, bearing welcome tidings. Black Panther had evidently started upon the war-trail as intended, taking with him nearly every brave capable of bearing arms. Those left behind were for the most part aged men or youths, with a few warriors; the rest being their women and children.

Don Manuel listened to this report with glittering eyes and diabolical smile. As Pepe concluded he turned toward his followers and addressed them, in a quick, decisive tone.

"My braves, you hear the report of our guide. Black Panther has gone to attack our friends, and if he succeeds, not one of our race will be left alive to tell the tale. It is either them or us. Choose—which shall it be?"

A deep murmur ran around the troop, and Don Manuel knew that he could depend upon them to carry out his bloody plans.

"Them, then. Good! Now listen. The dogs have gone, but they have left their hearts behind them. We can deal them a more bitter blow here than were we to kill half their fighting men. And we must do it. I will lead the way, and set the example. See that you follow it. Strike, then, quick and hard. Don't pause to see whether it is man or woman who confronts your steel. Children grow up to man-

hood, and these brats drink in hatred for our race with their mothers' milk. Strike heavy, then. For every life ended a broad dollar shall be distributed among you. My braves, can I depend upon you?"

"Yes—yes! death to the heathens!" came the answer as from one man, low, but deep and determinate.

"Good! Pepe, lead on."

With their horses' feet muffled, the Spaniards rode on, eager to begin their feast of blood, noiselessly nearing the doomed village whose occupants were for the most part slumbering in peaceful quietness.

Pepe and another veteran crept forward, leaving the rest awaiting the time for action. Choosing opposite sides, the two men easily eluded the somnolent guards, and then selecting their huts, quickly ignited resinous torches, and applied them to the frail structures.

Like a flash of lightning the dried grass and weeds caught, and then hurling their torches upon the huts, the two scouts set up a wild cry that roused the entire village, and sounded the signal for which the soldiers were impatiently waiting. Emptying their carbines into the affrighted crowd with fatal effect, Pepe and his comrade sprung to join the others, and then mounting their horses, rushed with hoarse yells to the massacre.

The surprise was complete and most deadly. The fresh breeze carried burning flakes of straw from the fired huts to still others, until half the entire number were wrapped in the roaring flames, lighting up the horrible scene with mid-day vividness, sending the lurid glare far above the neighboring hill-tops.

Faithfully were Don Manuel's orders carried out. His men did not look upon the savages as human beings, but more like wild beasts that it was a praiseworthy act to wipe from the face of the earth.

Unsuspecting danger, the Indians had been roused from their slumber by the shouts and shots, mingled with the broad glare of flames that moved and crackled, as though exulting in the wanton destruction. Fleeing from one enemy, they rushed forth, only to be confronted by another even more relentless.

A few resisted; only a few, for the devastating fire prevented all but some half a score from securing their weapons. But even these had scarce time for more than one blow, ere the death-dealer was upon them. Where one Spaniard fell a score of helpless beings went down to death. It was not a battle—it was a massacre, brutal, unprovoked and diabolical.

For a full half-hour this raged, then ceased for lack of further victims. Not that all were slain; during the terrible confusion many, both men, women and children, had fled from the spot of death, and unnoticed amid the melee, had gained the hills in safety, where they crouched in trembling horror and dread.

Don Fabian was sitting on his horse, a blood-stained sword still unsheathed in his hand, gazing over the fearful scene. A sad expression rested upon his features, and though he had been taught to consider these savages as a grade lower than the wild beasts, he felt now as though guilty of a great and heinous crime.

"Ha! comrade," cried Don Manuel, riding up, and wiping the sweat from his grimed brow, "viewing the glorious work? A grand blow! 'Twill paralyze this 'cursed Black Panther more than had we whipped his force in open battle."

"Yes; but what will be the result?"

"The result? Peace—he will never dare attempt another blow when he sees how deeply in earnest we are."

"No, you are wrong. This will but madden him to frenzy; and not only him, but every savage in the country. Don Manuel, had you been the worst foe in life of the colony, you could not have dealt us a more bitter or deadly blow. Mark my words—this will be our ruin," gloomily responded the young Spaniard.

"Bah! the sight of blood has soured your stomach. I forgot you were but a boy," sneered Don Manuel.

"Hold!" and Fabian's eyes flashed. "Though a boy, I still know how to resent an insult, and unless you apologize, you will do me the favor—" and one hand significantly touched his sword.

"For the present, then, I apologize, as we have not time to quarrel among ourselves. But when we reach the colony, then I am very much at your service—and my sword as well," pointedly replied Don Manuel.

"Good! I shall not forget."

"Meantime, I believe you are subject to my orders. Oblige me by sending Pepe hither, and then you can get the troops in order for hasty marching."

Fabian saluted stiffly, and then rode away, Don Manuel's gaze following his handsome figure, while an ugly smile curled his lip. The old tracker quickly appeared, and to him the officer spoke:

"Pepe, have you examined the slain yet?"

"Ours, you mean?"

"No, the heathen dogs. There is one—the half-breed's mother; I would like to take her head to the fort, as proof that she is forever out of the way."

"I don't think she is here. However, if she is, I will soon bring you the proof. And if I may advise, Don Manuel, you will be getting ready to travel as quick as may be. The sooner we get away from this spot, the better."

"Why so?"

For answer, Pepe pointed to the still smoking lodges.

"That light and hot smoke will have been seen by every eye within a score miles of here. Not only these people, but every tribe to the east, north and west of here are our enemies. That light will call them up. If we fall in with them then, we would make but a scant mouthful."

"Well, go and do as I bid. Find the head, and ten golden ounces are yours."

But Don Manuel was disappointed in this, for the body of Still Water was not to be found among the slain. With a bitter curse of rage, he gave the order to march on.

So rapidly had events transpired since the first assault, that the night lacked an hour or more of daylight, and in that hour the Spaniards traversed fully half a score miles. Some distance in advance rode the trailer, a somber look upon

his bronzed features. Evidently his mind was ill at ease.

An almost imperceptible gesture brought Don Manuel up beside him, curiosity in his eyes.

"What is it, Pepe?"

"Nothing—as yet. But will it stay nothing long? I don't think so. I think we'll see trouble before rejoining our friends."

"Why so? Your answer, Pepe?"

"First, tell me what you told the commandante—about your return, I mean."

"I told him what I contemplated, and that this once done, I would hasten immediately back, to relieve him if besieged by Black Panther."

"Just so. And in that we will find our greatest trouble. He has—perhaps a few more, perhaps a few less—somewhere near one thousand braves with him now, all well armed and mounted. If intending to attack the colony, they are there before this. Consequently, their animals are resting while we are wearing ours out by hard riding. Your plan is—if they are surrounding the fort, to charge and cut your way through them?"

"Yes, that is what we agreed upon."

"We are fifty—that is twenty to one. Can we do it on worn-out horses? No. Then, had you not promised, I would advise a rest here among the hills until nightfall; then we could do it easily."

"There is no time. Colonel Perez will be uneasy. But you exaggerate the danger. The craven curs will flee from our swords like coyotes from before a lion."

Pepe shook his grizzled head in dissent, but did not speak his real thoughts, knowing how useless that would be. As Don Manuel turned to fall back to his station, a cry broke from his lips, and his outstretched hand directed the gaze of all toward the object that had drawn forth the exclamation.

In the gray light of breaking day, just rising the crest of a hill in their rear, fully two miles away, was a gradually-spreading cloud that could only be formed of dust. A fierce, snarling curse burst from the trailer's lips as his keen eyes read the truth.

"Look to your animals, comrades, and see to it that they do not waste their strength. The copper-skins are after us, and coming, too, directly from the village. If your horses can not outstep those they bestride, you will scarce have time to repeat your prayers—they count ten heads to our one, at the least."

Nothing more was said, but each man devoted his entire attention to the management of his horse, assisting them by every art in their power. For a mile or two this continued, but the frown deepened upon their leader's face.

As he glanced backward—beard on shoulder—he saw that the enemy was slowly but certainly lessening the intervening distance. Even supposing his horses could maintain their present rate of speed—which, jaded as they already were, he knew was impossible for the necessary length of time—the red-skins would overhaul them within half a score of miles. Several of the horses—among them those bestrode by Don Manuel, Fabian and Pepe—could have easily distanced their comrades, but not one thought

of desertion. The fate of one must be the fate of all, and if fight they must, it would be side by side.

"You see, Pepe," muttered Don Manuel, "the red devils are gaining ground. How long can our horses stand this pace?"

"Half an hour—not more. But that will do. You can see that we must stand at bay, but not here in the open, where they could first surround and then crush us easily. A little less than three miles from here is a place where we must make the stand. Even if we do not whip the heathen dogs, we will have time to make our mark upon them. Three lives for one is small enough, but then 'tis better than to die without any pay," grimly uttered the *rastreador*.

"You think they are from the village?"

"I know it—but who? Whether Black Panther, called back by the fire-glow, or some of his mountain allies, I can't say. Whoever it is, they are in earnest, and we must fight them, though it can end only in one way."

"And that end is?"

"The colony will have—counting those who fell at the village, last night—just sixty-one mouths the less to feed," slowly replied Pepe.

"So be it, then! But the heathens shall boast of no hollow victory. We will show them how Spaniards can fight. But you, Pepe, lead directly to this stand. The sooner there, the more time to prepare for the struggle," coolly uttered Don Manuel, for whatever his faults, he was no coward.

Ten minutes more brought them to the foot of a long range of hills, whose rocky faces reached to the level plain, towering aloft for hundreds of feet. Into a narrow, defile-like valley, Pepe dashed, followed by the fugitives.

This passage gradually narrowed until barely two horsemen could ride abreast, and then only with care to avoid the sharp, jutting angles. Then this abruptly widened and spread out into a singular-looking valley, not unlike a mammoth crater, the shape, rocky hills rising abruptly on every side, leaving only this one mode of entrance or exit, unless by scaling the hills; an herculean task.

"You see, Don Manuel," chuckled Pepe, as he turned in his saddle. "This is our slaughter-pen. With three men to hold the entrance at a time, others taking their turns as one or another falls, how many heads can we score before there are not three sound ones of our side left?"

"A stout position, Pepe, truly, and we will make it a dear one for them to win. But look—can not they scale those hills and then hurl those rocks down upon us?"

"Yes—if they are cool enough to think of it. In that case it will be the sooner over—that is all. Our race is well-nigh run, anyway."

"Men," cried Don Manuel, baring his sword and then flinging the scabbard away, "you see this? Need I tell you what it means? No—you are Spaniards; I see you comprehend my meaning. In ten minutes more the red heathen will be upon us. We can not flee—then we must fight. I do not tell you that we will win victory, for you are no fools. You know the odds and can count the chances for yourselves. But if die we must, let it be like men—as true soldiers of Spain, not like cowardly coyotes. Sword in hand

—give our last breaths to dealing a blow for vengeance. They have ever feared us in life—let us teach them to respect us in death! Comrades, I have spoken!”

A wild cheer followed this speech, spoken as it was with a burning eloquence that fired the heart of the most timid. Cornered beyond a possibility of escape they would prove a terrible foe.

Quickly preparing each man sought his station, and awaited the crisis in stern silence. It was not long in coming—a long, shrill yell announced the presence of the avengers of blood, and then the rocky defile rung loudly with the echoes of rapid hoof-strokes.

Though that could scarcely be, it would seem that the Indians were unaware of how advantageously the fugitives were posted, for they betrayed none of that caution so characteristic of their race, but rushed on along the narrow defile with a mad impetuosity that, even more than aught else, contributed to their disastrous repulse. The foremost of the party became jammed together as the passage contracted, while those behind pressed eagerly forward, with wild yells of vengeance.

Thus pressed rudely against the sharp, jagged spur of rock, the horses speedily became unmanageable, rearing, plunging and screaming like wild beasts in their pain and affright, biting and tearing at each other's throats, while the crushing pressure from behind prevented their retreat. Thus they were when the clear voice of Don Manuel rung out, uttering the words.

“Now, my braves—give them no time to recover! Fire!”

A rattling volley answered, and the foremost of the enemy went down almost to a man, both horse and rider, so deadly was the discharge. But one of those remaining uttered the war-whoop of his tribe, and leveling a pistol, fired.

A stifled groan—a fall; and Don Manuel motioned another soldier to the front. Then with his own pistol he took deliberate aim at the Indian and fired. A single scarlet-tipped plume floated upon the air, cut from the warrior's breast, but the thrilling war-cry echoed back the defiance.

This warrior was Black Panther. The enemies were at last front to front in battle array. Each recognized the other, and the same vow was registered in the two hearts; that both should not leave the field alive.

Black Panther had now learned all that he required, and at once sounded the signal of retreat. His prey was before him, secure beyond the possibility of escape unless by cutting a road directly through his force, and thoughtful of his own braves, he desired to avoid all unnecessary slaughter. As they fell back, a derisive cheer followed them from the Spaniards, but this demonstration was quickly checked by the low, peculiar yell that followed. Its deadly significance could not be misunderstood.

“The craven curs!” muttered Don Manuel to himself, half unconsciously. “They fear to attack us again, and mean to starve us out!”

“Not so, captain,” quickly replied Pepe, who was standing near. “They are by far too smart for that. They know that our horses are here for food, and water is plenty in yonder spring. Depend upon it they will not let our weapons

rust for lack of use. They have felt us—the next time *we will feel them!*”

“You think—”

“See! they waste little time,” cried Pepe, nodding toward the defile.

“What is that, Pepe? what does it mean?” muttered Don Manuel, in astonishment.

“You see—they are dragging away their dead and the horses, also, to clear the passage for a rush. They mean sure work, this time.”

Such was indeed the case. From around the curve in the defile, lassoes were being cast on the dead bodies, that were then dragged away from where they choked up the pass. Pepe added, earnestly:

“If you take my advice, Don Manuel, you will dismount your men, and prepare for fight, hand-to-hand. Horsemen cannot keep those devils out, when they come with their devilish yells and screeches, and once let them gain a foothold here, inside, and all is over.”

This suggestion was quickly followed, and none too soon. Scarcely were the horses secured and the men stationed around the entrance, than like magic the defile swarmed with the dusky figures that poured forward with wild yells of vengeance.

Naturally brave, they seemed doubly so now, as they rushed upon the murderers. They thought not of their own lives—they only saw the brutal slayers of their dear one before them, and their hearts cried aloud for vengeance.

As before, the deadly volley swept away the front ranks, but those behind pressed on, trampling ruthlessly under foot their fellow comrades, who, even with their last breath clutched at the rocks and strove to drag their helpless bodies near enough to the enemy to deal them one blow before dying.

At their head was Black Panther, seemingly bearing a charmed life. More than once had a bullet touched his floating hair, his garments, but without injury to him, steadily, like an avenging Nemesis he advanced, his lithe bow sending feathered shafts tipped with death in quick succession into the ranks of the Spaniards.

He did not once aim at the life of Don Manuel, but there was a terrible intensity in his glowing gaze that caused a cold thrill to pervade the frame of the Spaniard. He felt that though he was death-doomed, the fate of those momentarily falling around him, would be comparative bliss beside that which was reserved for him.

The policy of the whites, closely adhered to, gave them an advantage over their adversaries, whose ranks were so densely crowded that even should a bullet miss its intended mark, another was almost certain to fall a victim, while only a sufficient number of the Spaniards to protect the entrance were exposed at one time, the rest remaining sheltered behind the rocky walls, busily reloading the fire-arms as quickly as discharged.

But this could not last long, and once more Black Panther sounded the retreat, as the pass was blocked almost breast high with the bodies of the slain and wounded Indians. Like magic the warriors vanished, but this time no yells or cheers followed them from the Spaniards.

Nearly a score of their number were either

dead or disabled. Another such assault would prove fatal to all. Gloomily Don Manuel realized this, and drawing Pepe aside, consulted with him in earnest tones.

As before, the cunning lassoes were at work removing the obstructing dead from the pass, and, carbine in hand, Don Manuel advanced to see if he could not obtain a shot, hoping thus to retard the work and so gain a breathing-spell, for his men. One by one the bodies were dragged away, and eager to gain the desired shot, he advanced still further.

A single loud yell rung out, and from around the curve there sprung into view a single figure. Quick as thought the carbine was leveled, but at the very instant of touching the trigger, something struck the Spaniard, and he was hurled heavily to the ground. A circle of fire seemed wrapped around his neck, and he strove to shriek out the intense pain that filled every fiber, but in vain.

That dark figure was Black Panther, and springing forward he had flung his lasso with unerring aim, its noose settling firmly over the Spaniard's head. A dexterous jerk, and then the living prey was being dragged away over the flinty ground, when Pepe darted forward, and with one slash of his keen knife, severed the fatal rope.

Stooping, he essayed to raise Don Manuel from the ground, but with a deep, gurgling groan, he fell prostrate, the hot life-blood oozing from his mouth and nostrils. A feathered shaft had pierced his throat, forever stilling that brave but reckless and hardened heart.

Whatever his faults, the soldiers fairly idolized their daring leader, and as one man they rushed to the rescue, at the same time that Black Panther sounded the onset. While several bore the senseless body to the valley, the others fought desperately, keeping back the horde of savages, until their former position was gained. Then again began the frightful struggle for the vantage-ground.

As if to intensify the scene, wild yells arose from the hill-tops above, and then came the rumbling of great boulders set in motion, crashing their resistless way down the steep slope, and madly thundering over the level bottom, crushing and maiming both man and beast. Terrified by this new danger, the Spaniards momentarily faltered, and seizing the vantage, the savages pressed them more hardly and fairly gained an entrance into the valley.

A shrill yell from Black Panther caused a cessation of the rocky avalanche, and then the dusky warriors began nimbly descending to assist their brethren. This was the scene that met Don Manuel's gaze as he staggered to his feet from the little niche into which he had been placed, and where the keen eyes of Black Panther had not yet ferreted him out.

That glance told him all was lost. His men, though still desperately fighting, were hopelessly surrounded, and falling one by one before overwhelming numbers. To remain thus meant certain death, and he resolved upon flight, if such were possible.

Ten seconds sufficed for him to secure his horse and bestride the saddle, sword still in hand. Then heading down the defile, he plunged

the spurs rowel deep and sprung forward like an arrow of light.

A wild yell behind him told that this action was observed, and turning his head Don Manuel beheld Black Panther bound forward in rapid pursuit. Two figures confronted him at the mouth of the pass. A swift stroke—a plunge of the maddened horse, and the fugitive was free from them, at least.

Then out upon the level plain he dashed, the only one of that band who had escaped from the valley of death. But the exultant cry that rose to his lips died away as he noted a horseman spur out after him.

No need for a second glance. It was the Tejuas chieftain, Black Panther. Then began a stern race for life and death!

CHAPTER IX.

THE STORM BREAKS.

THE Spaniards at the colony grew very uneasy as the latest time set by Don Manuel for his return, came, passed by, adding hour after hour to the limit. They began to fear that the surpiser had been surprised, for as yet nothing had been seen or heard of Black Panther.

That the party had, to some degree, at least, accomplished their mission, the garrison had had ample evidence in the lurid glow that reddened the northwestern horizon. Antone positively declared that this light arose from where the Tejuas had located their village.

A word will explain why they had not seen Black Panther, who, true to the plans overheard by Pepe, had started for the colony at the head of his warriors, little suspecting the deadly blow that was even then being aimed at their hearts. Owing to the wide *detour* made by the Spaniards, the rival bands passed each other without a collision.

When some two miles from the colony, Black Panther was met by an escaped slave, one of his own people, who had gleaned important information and then fled to convey it to his chief in time. From him Don Pablo learned the purpose of Don Manuel's journey, and at once divided his force, directing one half of the party to remain in that vicinity to cut off the retreat of the Spaniards in case he should miss them on the way, and then rode madly toward the village followed by the anxious warriors.

The significant red glare met their gaze telling them they were too late to save their friends, but with wildly-throbbing hearts they pressed on for vengeance. In the night they passed the marauders, unsuspectingly, and on reaching the ruined village, found their enemy fled, though leaving a broad trail. Following this, the reader already knows the result.

"Ha! look yonder—a horseman! And if my eyes do not betray me, one of our soldiers," suddenly cried Colonel Perez, standing upon the flat-roofed Mission-house.

"Yes—'tis Don Manuel—but alone!" muttered Don Cavella, in a constrained voice.

Lota gently drew Teresa to one side, and though the face of the latter maiden was very pale, with true womanly delicacy she strove to

conceal the horrible, sickening dread that was wringing her heart-strings. With this man had gayly ridden forth her lover—where was he now?

In anticipation of an attack the Mission-house had been strongly garrisoned, and for its friendly shelter, the non-combatants had abandoned their dwellings.

At a laboring gallop the horseman came nearer, but before the *arroyo* was reached, the tortured animal staggered and fell, the hot blood gushing from its mouth and nostrils. At the expense of its own life, the noble creature had carried its master to safety.

The soldier's disastrous story was soon told, and a cold thrill of apprehension struck every heart as they realized the full force of the blow. Three-score of their picked men, the very flower of the colony troops, cut off at the first stroke. What then would be the fate of the rest, when the Tejuas chief should attack them with his entire force?

Teresa broke from the restraining grasp of her sister, and pressing through the group, gasped rather than spoke:

"Tell me—where did you leave him—Don Fabian?"

"Yes, Don Manuel," and the voice of the commandante slightly quavered, "tell on. My son?"

"Dead upon the field of battle," was the solemn reply. "He did a soldier's duty, and was a hero even among those brave men. I saw him fall upon a mound of the heathen dogs that had been built up around him by his own hands."

"Dead—my God! dead!" gasped Teresa, and she sunk back senseless into the arms of her father, who quickly bore her from the roof.

An accident had given Don Manuel the victory in his race with Black Panther. The horse of the latter had broken into the burrow of some ground animal, and falling, had dislocated its neck. Alighting nimbly upon his feet, the chief still maintained the chase, but Don Manuel cared not to await a meeting, and spurred on to carry the sad tidings to the colony.

The nature of the ground had led him somewhat out of a direct course, and thus he had passed the force left by Black Panther, before they espied him. Not knowing the joy his capture would give their chief, pursuit was not given, and so the Spaniard reached the fort in safety.

"How many do they number—both parties?" asked Colonel Perez, suppressing all emotion at the announcement of his son's death.

"One thousand, at the least."

"That is long odds, when they fight with such desperate bravery as you say, but we can hold them at bay in these strong defenses."

"But the mines?" suggested another member of the council.

"True. We must dispatch a messenger with word of this, asking help. I will go seek a suitable one, while you attend to the duty here. See that ample supplies of food and water are stowed away."

Proceeding to the fort, Colonel Perez called a number of men to him, and closely questioned them. Among them was Corporal Baja, and finally the commandante said:

"You seem the best informed—will you volunteer to carry a dispatch to the colony on the Gila?"

"Yes, colonel."

"Good. Go and prepare your horse, and then come to me for instructions. I will have a dispatch ready for you."

Two minutes later Corporal Antone rode forth from the fort and dashed away upon his mission.

An hour after this the sentinels gave warning of the approach of a large body of horsemen. All doubt as to their identity was quickly dispelled; the army of Black Panther was at last before the walls of the colony. As the Spaniards contrasted their forces, despite the stout defenses around them, their hearts sunk and they felt that they were doomed.

A single horseman advanced, waving a white-tanned robe before his face as a signal for a truce. At a short distance from the gates he was halted, and the commandante demanded the nature of his business.

"I am Black Panther. I come to give you one more chance for your lives. If that is refused, then you die, and not one stone shall be left upon another of all your strong works. Look out yonder and say if I am idly boasting."

"Say on—what are your terms?"

"Deliver up to me the persons of Don Manuel and of Don Cavella; all the rest can go free, with their horses and side-arms, provided they do not tarry in the country of the red-man."

"What security have we that you will keep your word—that when we leave our defenses, you will not attack and massacre us all?"

"The word of a man. We are not Spaniards," cuttingly returned Black Panther.

"And if we refuse?"

"I have told you. All shall die, then."

"You forget that *we* shall have something to say about that. Can your naked braves carry this fort, garrisoned as it is, and armed with cannon?"

"Yes. We have sworn to do it, even though nine out of every ten should die in the attempt."

"Give us time to think it over and to consult together."

"Five minutes, then—no more. And to show you that there is nothing to hope for from without, I tell you that your messenger was seen, and is ere this in the power of the braves that I sent after him. And even should he get through, of what avail? He could not reach your friends. Think not that my tribe is the only one that has taken arms. Ere this moon wanes, not a Spaniard will be left alive in our country. But enough. Do you surrender?"

"Never! if you want these gentlemen, you must come and take them!"

Black Panther did not reply; but turned and rode rapidly away. Joining his chiefs, they appeared to be consulting earnestly.

Though little of moment was done that day in the way of absolute fighting, yet the besiegers were not idle. The dwellings were destroyed by fire, and the entrances to the mines were blocked up, their works destroyed completely. Then the little stream that ran through one corner of the fort, thus supplying it with water, was turn-

ed from its course by a channel dug across the *arroyo*.

Other braves were busily engaged in collecting wood, until by nightfall a huge pile was stacked upon the prairie in full view of the besieged, yet beyond range of all arms save the two small cannon, ammunition for which was so scarce that they were reserved to repel a more direct attack. All conjectures as to the use for this wood were soon put at rest.

By the bright moonlight the besieged witnessed a terribly significant sight. A half-score stout posts were planted firmly in the ground, and to each one of these was tied a naked white man.

The Spaniards now knew them to be the survivors of that frightful struggle in the valley of death, captured alive for a more horrible fate. They were doomed to suffer death at the fire-stake!

"Train the cannon upon the crowd and aim as though your life depended upon every shot," muttered Colonel Perez to the grizzled gunner.

"But, colonel, you forget our—"

"Better death at once, even though by the hands of brethren, than to miserably perish in yonder flame," sternly added the commandante.

But it was now too late to accomplish anything of moment with the cannon, for at the first report the Indians scattered widely, leaving only several of their number beside their victims. These braves hastily ignited the funeral pyres, and then retreated to a safer distance.

As the cruel flames leaped higher and grew more intense in heat, the shrieks and groans of the poor victims came floating over the intervening space with horrible distinctness, and even the stout soldiers of a lifetime's service covered their eyes and closed their ears to shut out the piteous appeals for the assistance they were unable to render.

The fires had been so cunningly arranged that though fully an hour rolled by, the cries of the tortured Spaniards still arose, though growing momentarily weaker, rendering the night air hideous. As if fascinated by the fearful scene, the attention of all the besieged was riveted in that direction, even while a new peril was creeping upon them.

The bed of the diverted creek was several feet in depth, and as before stated, ran directly beneath one corner of the fort, where stout palisades prevented the entrance of a foe. Along this bed now crept a shadowy line, seemingly alive, yet in shape bearing no semblance to human beings.

This line then spread itself along the side of the building, in the dark shade, closing up more compactly, as if preparing for some desperate action. Suddenly the first link sprung forward, and when at the huge gate, seemed to fall apart, the smaller half dashing away over the prairie in the shape of an Indian warrior.

Others followed in quick succession, and not until fully a dozen had contributed their load to the rapidly growing pile of brushwood, did the Spaniards discover their presence. Even then they believed it to be only an abortive assault, and as the soldiers fired hastily at the

rapidly flying figures, their voices rose in loud cheers.

Some of the Indians dashed up within range and began firing, though inflicting but little damage. This, also, was a part of the subtle plot, for under cover of the confusion two chosen braves were coolly completing the work so well begun.

In carefully prepared sacks they had each carried a supply of live coals, and now kneeling beside the brush pile they busily fanned the growing blaze. Just as the flames began to gain strength, a loud shout from the wall top above their heads told of discovery, and as the savages sprung around, several reports echoed out from the gate-top, so close that the flash of the carbines scorched the naked flesh.

Both Indians fell, one dead, the other dying, but the fires were still alive, gaining power at every moment. Five minutes later and the garrison would have been doomed.

A bucket of water hurled by a steady hand down upon the fire struck one of the patches of flame and almost extinguished it. Then it was that a rare heroism was displayed.

The wounded savage painfully dragged himself forward and bowed his form over the flame kindled by his hands. Though the fire scorched and shriveled his flesh, he did not flinch. Black Panther had given him his orders, and even after death he respected them.

The brawny figure outstretched, received the contents of the second bucket, but the fire beneath still burned on. Another volley, and with a convulsive quiver the Indian died, but his resolution seemed even stronger than death.

The stout limbs stiffened like iron bars, supporting the broad form over the fire that was now spreading insidiously beneath the massive pile, rapidly gaining a power that soon nothing could check while fuel remained for it to devour.

From the *arroyo* bank came a deadly fusilade, and the gate defenders went down one after another, mortally stricken. And now the time was past when the fire might have been checked; it must rage until the brushwood vanished.

The defenders hoisted up their water-casks and jars, poisoning them in such a manner that their liquid contents fell upon the fire, yet with those managing them well hidden from view of the enemy. By these means the gates were kept from being seriously burned, but though failing in that, Black Panther felt that he had almost gained his secondary object: the store of water saved up by the Spaniards, after seeing their supply about to be cut off must now be nearly exhausted.

CHAPTER X.

ANTONE'S RIDE.

ONE portion, at least, of Black Panther's boast to Colonel Perez had been true. Corporal Baja had been discovered by a party led by the chief, as they encircled the colony to cut off attempted escape by flight, and, recognizing the soldier, Black Panther had dispatched a dozen trusty braves after him. From the route taken, he well knew the object of the soldier's journey, and his destination.

Keen-sighted, Antone had discovered the In-

dians at nearly the same time, and knowing that any attempt at concealment would be vain, he dashed forward in precipitate flight, trusting that his horse, carefully chosen for speed and endurance, could outfoot those of his pursuers, believing them already somewhat jaded. His surmise proved to be correct, for after a chase of several hours' duration, the pursuers commenced to drop behind one by one, until he finally lost sight of them altogether.

It was after sunset when he rose the hill from whose crest a faint glimpse could be obtained of the colony, and abruptly he checked his horse, a cry of horror upon his lips. Truly a fearful scene met his gaze, and though he had heard the reports of fire-arms for the last half-hour, he was not prepared for this.

A dozen jets of flames were springing up from what he knew were the buildings of the colony, and what seemed a countless legion of dusky figures were dancing around in fiendish glee, the rapidly-growing light revealing scores of still and ghastly forms strewn thickly upon the ground; figures that he knew were those of his own race.

The truth was plain. The Indians were uprising over the entire country, and in this case, at least, they had been victorious.

Antone shuddered with a sickening dread as he thought of his friends at home. How soon might not their fate be like that of these unfortunates? If here, at the strongest post in the country, the Indians were triumphant, what chance had the others?

But his gloomy forebodings were cast to the winds, as an imminent peril threatened himself. Up the opposite hillside, with wild yells, came a body of savages, spurring their horses on at breakneck speed. Turning, Antone spoke to his jaded horse and again entered upon a race for life and death—the second upon that eventful day.

CHAPTER XI.

CLOSING ACCOUNTS.

DAY by day the prospects of the besieged grew more gloomy and desperate. Not one of their number could show himself above the walls, without receiving a rifle-shot or a flight of arrows from the pits along the *arroyo* banks. And on the second day Black Panther paraded their messenger, Corporal Baja, before them, thus showing that his boast had not been made without foundation.

Don Manuel it was that suggested the plan of bringing forth the slaves who were kept close confined, and arranging them along the walls, so that their bodies might serve for breastworks behind which the Spaniards might hope to stand with some degree of safety, while trying to drive the enemy from the creek banks. But this proved abortive, for both friend and foe were ruthlessly shot down. The Tejuas chief had sworn to reduce the fort, and nothing human could prevent him.

Day by day their force grew stronger, and the Spaniards saw that the end must soon come. Colonel Perez asked for a truce, and proposed a consultation as to terms, but Black

Panther sternly refused. The time for that was past.

Nearly a week passed by, and then, on a dark and stormy night, an attack was made upon both the fort and Mission-house. With considerable loss, the garrison of the first-named place repulsed the assault, but when day came they saw that the Mission-house had fallen. Bound and helpless, the survivors were ranged along the walls, even as the Indian slaves had been treated, doubtless to effect the same purpose.

Colonel Perez and Don Manuel had a long and earnest consultation together, the result of which was soon divulged to the garrison, and volunteers called for. The commandante briefly stated their resources, and showed that in a short time they must succumb to the enemies' force, unless reinforcements were had. These Don Manuel had volunteered to go after, but as there was no hope of secretly leaving the fort, an open dash must be made, the very boldness of which would be apt to insure success.

Don Manuel addressed his soldiers. He said that of those making the attempt, some, perhaps half, perhaps all, would be slain, but not more surely than if they remained there. If they succeeded, with the assistance brought, they would soon crush this insurrection. Who would volunteer? Half the soldiers stepped forward. Of these Don Manuel selected twelve, and then bade them prepare for the venture, that night.

The venture was made—and failed. As in the prairie the locusts surround a young tree, so the Indians sprung up and surrounded that desperate band, as they dashed forth from the fort. A desperate fight ensued, but there could be only one end. Don Manuel was the last—his sword drank the life-blood of a full score of victims, for, recognizing him, the Indians essayed his capture, not death.

They fairly pulled down his strong-limbed horse, and then pounced upon the daring Spaniard. A single report came, and the confused men hastily separated. There, a ghastly sight, lay Don Manuel, his skull blown to atoms. In one hand he clutched the pistol that had ended his career. Though cruel, vindictive and wicked, he lived and died a brave man.

Not one of that little band escaped, and now, in sullen despair, the Spaniards resolved to die fighting to the last. One by one they murdered the helpless slaves, and stacked them upon the ramparts. Knowing that death was to be their fate, they resolved to inflict all the damage possible.

Even while these bloody deeds were being transacted, interesting revelations were going on within the Mission-house.

As stated, the family of Don Cavella had sought refuge there, and when it was captured, Black Panther and Lota once more met, as also did Still Water and the father of her son. Only for the interposition of the chief, this last would have been of a tragic nature, though the Spaniard was even then lying wounded well-nigh unto death.

Black Panther, in answer to a call from Don Cavella, was standing beside the wounded man. The latter then confirmed the story told by Still Water, in so far as it concerned the chief. He

knew that he was dying, and that thought endowed him with a strange courage, until he spoke of his children.

"Rest easy on that score," replied Black Panther. "They shall not be harmed. I cannot forget that they are my—my sisters."

"But if they were not?"

"Even then, I loved them both too well. For Teresa's sake, I spared Don Fabian's life, though he is yet a prisoner. If they wish, I will send them to the country of their own people."

"May our good Lady bless you!" and a tear dimmed the Spaniard's eye. "This emboldens me to ask you another favor. In my breast you will find two papers—they concern Lota. She is not my child, but—"

"Not your child?" gasped Black Panther, trembling like a leaf.

"No. Listen, I have not much time—I am growing weak, and I cannot think so clearly. Do not interrupt me. I call the Blessed Virgin to witness that I speak the truth now, and these papers confirm my words."

The substance of his confession, condensed and freed from his wandering thoughts, was much as follows:

Lota was the only child of a distant relative, who, dying, had left her in charge of Don Cavella, who was to act as her guardian until she was of age. This occurred soon after his marriage, and as time passed on, circumstances caused him to use much of the fortune left, and to avoid discovery, he had retired to the silver-mines, his wife having died, leaving him one child, Teresa. At first he had intended to defraud the orphan, that his own child might be provided for, but the mine had proved richer than his expectations, and he had refunded the amount.

This property was situated in Mexico, the deeds to which he now held for Lota, who, since adoption, had been known by his name.

Black Panther scarce waited to hear the last of this confession, before he hastened to Lota, to tell her of his new discovery. Of this conversation we need not speak. Even when seeing him as an avenger of blood, Lota had loved him. Knowing his wrongs, after he had acted the generous enemy, as well as previously, she could not blame him, while deeply regretting the fate of the people.

It needs not to dwell upon the tragic end of the Spanish colony. The tale may be briefly told:

The same night of his confession, Don Cavella died, and was buried in the garden that had once been his own. Then a little party left the Mission-house forever—Black Panther, Lota, Teresa, Dolores and Still Water. On the prairie they were joined by Don Fabian and Antone. By day-dawn they were far from the spot of death.

As they rode away, their ears heard the significant sounds that told the end was at hand. A frightfully-stubborn fight resulted in the fort being carried by storm. When day came, not a Spaniard, dead or alive, was to be seen. The clouds of smoke that ascended to heaven marked their funeral pyre. And with that event, ended the Spanish rule in what is now known as Arizona. With cruelty and

bloodshed it had been inaugurated; in like manner it had ended, and nothing remains to mark their brief reign save the mines that may still be seen scattered over the country.

A few more words and we are done.

Don Fabian and Teresa Cavella returned to their own country, accompanied by Corporal Antone Baja and Dolores. But, before that time—which was months after the scenes first detailed—a strangely-solemn ceremony occurred at the head village of the Tejuas.

A captured priest had been brought all the way from the Mission at San Moreau, and by him the three couple were united; Black Panther and Lota; Fabian and Teresa; the gallant Corporal Antone Baja and his faithful Dolores. Then he was escorted safely home, having material for exciting stories the rest of his life.

Still Water died soon after the fall of the Spanish power.

Black Panther and Lota lived long and happily, seeing their people grow to be a power in the land, and their children's children gladdened their departing life.

THE END.

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